

Haruno Sakura: Psychopath and Saviour of the World

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Haruno Sakura: Psychopath and Saviour of the World

by [Jememe](#)

Summary

Tristan Hughes- charming family man, highly successful contract lawyer and consummate serial killer- opened his eyes as Haruno Sakura, a child in a world where professional assassins were treated as heroes and she smiled.

Notes

I wrote this as I was re-reading the Naruto manga for some more serious fics I'm working on as a way to stay engaged with the series. As such, the fic follows the main storyline fairly exactly, and borrows from the dialogue of the manga pretty heavily, so don't expect it to be wildly original, but I did my best to skip anything that didn't change at all and make something a little different happen in every scene.

Also, my way of getting past the inevitable massive moral crisis of being reborn into the Naruto world was to simply make the main character a psychopath.

Not a masterpiece, but I had fun writing it and I hope you have fun reading.

It's also pre-finished, so don't worry about me suddenly not updating. Updates every Tuesday and Thursday.

Newfound Sentience

It was a misty spring morning, a week before Sakura's second birthday, when she first became aware of the existential horror of her own existence. She of course had spent her entire, short life with the memories of Tristan Hughes- charming family man, highly successful contract lawyer and consummate serial killer- in her head but it wasn't until that moment that her brain became developed enough to adequately examine her own sentience.

It wasn't often during his previous sixty three years of life that he had pondered on what happened after death, considering it a largely useless subject to speculate on when there was no reasonable method of testing any hypothesis, but he certainly had never considered that he might be reborn as a pink haired girl in a world where magical ninjas were real and her father liked to cut his hair in the shape of a starfish.

Tristan, having chosen to die in a blaze of gunshots and glory when his Parkinson's diagnosis threatened to become debilitating to his hobbies (read: murdering innocents and evading the law), found herself looking forward to her future in a world where professional assassins were exulted heroes.

For now, Sakura would bide her time and enjoy the complete lack of responsibilities that childhood would bring.

Introductions for Idiots

Chapter Summary

Sakura loses hope in her future team mates and discusses the benefits of being a cute, pink-haired girl rather than a middle aged man of middling attractiveness.

Haruno Sakura, top kunoichi of her class and beloved member of Konoha, waited patiently for her name to be called in the team selections. She admitted to a level of curiosity to the results. If they followed traditions, she- as top kunoichi- would be placed on a team with the top boy and the dead last. She was, however, a clanless nobody with no apparent future as a shinobi and putting her on a team with the last Uchiha and village jinchūriki (who she strongly suspected was the child of the fourth hokage, if her rough understanding of the events that night were correct) to be trained by sharingan-no-kakashi himself seemed like a waste. Kiba felt like the more logical choice.

She wasn't worried. Not really. She had stuck with her age group- rather than graduating out early when it was still an option pre-massacre- because it contained eight highly influential clan kids, leaving her free to take up the extra spot and guaranteeing a high quality jōnin sensei. All she'd had to do was rank second in her class (only behind the Uchiha, she wanted to avoid being in the orbit of that kid's entirely unhinged competitive streak for as long as possible), ahead of the other seventeen clanless nobodies. But, Sakura did harbour just a tiny sparkle of hope. Hatake Kakashi was a legend, getting to train under one of the most blood stained shinobi in Konoha was a dream, even with his rumoured eccentricities. Hence why she was sceptical.

"... team seven; Haruno Sakura, Uzumaki Naruto, and Uchiha Sasuke..."

On the other hand, perhaps they were expected her to be worthless and relegated to the team's medic-nin, hence leaving Hatake free to focus the entirety of his attentions on the more important members of the group.

Sakura smiled cheerfully at her teammates (received a dazed expression and a scowl in return), pulled out a book she'd packed just in case, and settled in for the long haul.

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Sakura watched the eraser fall onto Hatake Kakashi's head with bemusement, utterly confused as to why the man went through with the obvious trap. She was almost think he was trying to get them to underestimate him if he wasn't-

"WHAHAHAHAHA!" Uzumaki laughed. "YOU FELL FOR IT! YOU FELL FOR IT!"

"Tch." The Uchiha was radiating his complete and utter dismissal of the jōnin.

Sakura felt her eyebrows rise. Completely and utterly incredulous in the face of her teammates not knowing who Hatake Kakashi was.

The Uzumaki she could almost understand, he was ostracised and an idiot about most things, though she'd expected him to know from his pranking endeavours, but the Uchiha? Did he ignore the comings and goings of other human beings entirely? Was he even aware there was a Sharingan user in the village?!

Did neither of them do *any* kind of research before getting their team placements?!

Sakura internally sighed and simply pasted on a bland smile in the face of the calculating glint in the jōnin's eye as he watched her. She could feel any positive expectations about her teammates draining away by the second.

"My first impression is..." He started and Sakura made sure to look suitably wide-eyed and impressed. "I don't like you guys. Meet me on the roof." He said before shunshining away.

Sakura outwardly sighed and followed the boys.

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"Well, let's begin by introducing yourselves." Hatake said, eye-smiling benevolently down at them. Next to her the Uchiha scowled belligerently and the Uzumaki was frowning.

"What do you wanna know?!" The blonde proclaimed. The eye smile deepened sadistically.

"How about your likes, dislikes, your dreams for the future and things

like that.” Hatake said.

“Hey, hey why don’t you introduce yourself to us first?!” Naruto cried and Sasuke nodded once.

“Yes, sensei. We don’t know anything about you.” Sakura added, unable to completely keep the sarcastic bite from her voice. Hatake shot her a sharp look but neither of the boys seemed to notice. She despaired for them. So did Hatake, if the slight flattening of the signature eye-smile as he watched the pair was anything to go by.

“Oh... me?” He started, the perfect tone of not-giving-a-fuck. “Well, my name is Hatake Kakashi. I have no desire to tell you my likes and dislikes. Dreams for the future... hmm. I have a lot of hobbies.”

“All he told us was his name!” Naruto whisper-yelled to them, voice filled with betrayal as if withholding information was akin to murdering the easter bunny rather than a sound tactic for shinobi when dealing with unknowns.

“You! The blonde can go first!” Hatake said, making the Uzumaki puff up with false bravado.

“Yosh!” He cried and Sakura felt her lips twitch as Hatake’s face visibly paled a shade. She wondered if she could get Uzumaki to yell about the springtime of youth. “My name is Uzumaki Naruto. What I like is cup ramen and when Iruka-sensei pays for my ramen! My dream is to be the next hokage and have the people of the village acknowledge my existence!”

Sakura did *not* imagine the quickly buried flash of pain across Hatake’s face at the words. She added the moment to her ‘Naruto is secretly a Namikaze’ mental file.

“Hobbies... pranks I guess.” Uzumaki finished lamely.

“Next.”

“My name is Uchiha Sasuke. There are lots of things I dislike, I don’t really like anything.” The Uchiha said, Sakura had to bite back a snort. “And... I can’t really call it a dream but I have a certain ambition. To kill a certain man.” Sakura supposed it would be hypocritical to criticise the boy for wanting to murder his brother, nor could she say it was a surprise (though judging by the shock on Naruto’s face he didn’t know who Sasuke was talking about. Did Naruto even know about the massacre?), but she did wonder if he was

aware of just how ridiculous he sounded.

“Ok.” Hatake sighed, sounding entirely done with the lot of them.

“Lastly the girl.”

Sakura beamed and put on her best ‘sweet-little-angel’ persona, eyes widened adorably and tone of voice full of naive optimism. It was the act that made adults see her as entirely incapable of wrongdoing, no matter how compromising a situation they found her in, and children flock to her and willing cater to her every need. There were a lot of benefits to being a cute, pink haired girl rather than a middle aged man of middling attractiveness.

“My name is Haruno Sakura. I like learning kenjutsu and fresh gossip, I dislike wilful ignorance.” She said, cutting a quick glance to the boys sitting next to her. Hatake followed her glance with a pained look in his lone eye. Naruto was bouncing in his seat and smiling at her. Sasuke seemed determined to ignore her existence entirely, glaring into the distance. “My hobby is reading.” She glanced at the satchel the jōnin kept his infamous porn stash and he narrowed his eye in warning. “My dream is to be an ANBU captain.”

Naruto loudly started asking questions and Sasuke scoffed at her but Sakura ignored them to continue smiling up at the jōnin. Hatake, for his part, was watching as if she were an atomic bomb just waiting to be set off. After a moment he sighed.

“Alright, I can work with that.” He said and her smile became just a tiny bit more genuine. “So for tomorrow...”

What followed was the typical, over-the-top scare tactics that Sakura mostly ignored seeming as they were clearly targeted at the two boys anyway and accepted the oddly detailed faux mission report feeling little but a detached sense of mirth at the idea that a team with the jinchūriki and the last Uchiha could actually fail.

She *was* interested in what the test was tomorrow. She knew enough to know that the tests jōnin sensei’s give were usually one learned from their jōnin sensei (who learned one from their jōnin sensei and so on), but they tended to be pretty tight lipped about the actual contents of the tests, only sharing them within the close knit shinobi circles. She’d heard rumours that ranged from having to invent a brand new jutsu in a manner of minutes to being dumped in the middle of training ground 44 in the middle of the night. She was positive most of them had been done at some point, but they seemed

unlikely options from a man not known for his wilful disregard for children's lives (read: not Mitsarashi Anko) and also faced with a team that was meant to actually pass.

At the very least she was looking forward to getting her ass handed to her by a village legend.

Getting Bribed in the Bell Test

Chapter Summary

In which Sakura eats a healthy breakfast, gets beaten up by a village legend and receives an A.

The morning before her genin test Sakura ate a wholesome breakfast full of slow-releasing energy and essential vitamins, content in the knowledge that it would be well and truly digested by the time Hatake showed up. She enjoyed a showing of love and support from her parents and set off for the training ground in her favourite, pastel purple qipao dress- the one that looked cutesy and delicate but was actually made with shinobi grade materials and discreetly fitted to ensure her the full range of movement and reduce excess fabric; courtesy of her genius chūnin mother- freshly washed with shinobi grade, scentless soap, her equally scentless pink hair stylishly pulled up into a practical, senbon decorated bun and carrying a backpack prepared for a potential week in the wilderness. She had a weapons pouch strapped to each thigh and the familiar weight of her chokutō on her hip.

(She had been saving her allowances and working part time jobs since she'd turned seven to afford it. A beautiful grey colour with white finishings, the almost black metal blade was chakra conductive and would shape itself to channel hers better and better throughout her career.)

As she walked through the village she greeted the people she passed with a brilliant smile and usually by name, not stopping to chat as she usually would but leaving a good impression with the people around her all the same. She arrived at the training ground right on time to the sight of the Uchiha and Uzumaki sitting at opposite sides of the clearing and both mulishly glaring into the distance.

As she cheerfully greeted the pair Sakura considered the merits of attempting to establish some kind of team dynamic between them, before watching the way the Uzumaki reddened and stumbled over his words and the Uchiha scoffed and turned away from her, and decided that since they weren't officially a team yet it wasn't her responsibility. Instead she passed the time reading an interesting breakdown on the Land of Lightning's main agricultural exports and performing her morning stretching and warm up routine.

When Hatake finally showed up, over three hours late, she felt adequately mentally stimulated and physically limber.

“Hey guys, good morning!” The jōnin said, body language completely nonchalant as he waved at them.

“YOU’RE LATE!!” Screamed Uzumaki as the Uchiha glared.

“Good morning, sensei.” Sakura waved back, a dreamy smile on her face.

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Sakura understood, she *did*. Hatake was a *really* great actor, he’d really perfected the ability to give a sense of Drama and Importance to his words. It was just... well...

Every genin team in Konoha was a three man cell. Hell, practically *every team* in Konoha was a three or four man cell. It’s what Konoha was famous for, why places like Kiri called them the ‘nice village’. Economically, it made their requests a touch more expensive and lead to them being outdone by Lightning during times of peace, but it’s what lead to their overwhelming victories during times of war. The other villages sent waves of solo fighters who had to learn to function together on the fly, but Konoha sent shinobi who *thrived* when they fought with their comrades.

To graduate the academy and still believe “only two of you can pass”, was a level of obliviousness Sakura couldn’t even comprehend.

Were all preteens this self involved? She certainly couldn’t remember being like that as Tristan, but then she supposed that could just be the self-involvement talking.

Either way, Hatake sent her a clear ‘roll with it’ look when she went to call him out on his bullshit, so she made sure to act suitably worried and decided to follow the lead of the other two. She figured he wanted to set them against each other, test their capabilities individually, and see if they could come together as a team in the end or remain self involved idiots.

Sakura eyed the other two boys. If it were anyone else she’d say the Uchiha would flat out refuse, but he and the Uzumaki had a weird bond that fluctuated wildly between best friends and undying enemies. She figured it was a fifty fifty chance that they worked together at some point today.

“You’re free to use every tool at your disposal.” Hatake said. “You won’t succeed unless you come at me intending to kill.”

“WHAT?!” Uzumaki squawked, alongside a cocky snort from the Uchiha. “But you’re so slow you can’t even dodge a blackboard eraser! We’ll definitely kill you!”

“Yes, sensei.” Sakura nodded. “We just graduated! You’ll be in danger.” Hatake’s mask may have been a black void that seemed to suck in the light from the surrounding area, making it impossible to discern any actual features, but Sakura could have sworn she saw his mouth twitch upwards at her just slightly too-deadpan-to-be-serious delivery.

“In the real world, those with no talent bark the loudest.” Hatake continued with what was actually quite sound advice for the blonde. “Ignore Mr. Deadlast and start when-”

Naruto had only just drawn out the kunai when, in a rush of air and a blur of movement so fast Sakura could have blinked and missed it completely, his own blade was aimed at the back of his head. Hatake nonchalantly centimetres away from killing the blonde effortlessly.

Sakura had moved instinctively, drawing her chokutō into a defensive position and settling onto the weight of her heels, but it was clear in a real fight she would be dead before she had even thought in the man’s direction. She felt her heartbeat increase and her breathing quicken. The beautiful thrill of adrenaline spread through her system.

“Hehe, it seems I’m beginning to like you guys.” Kakashi said, his tone entirely sadistic. “Let’s get going. Ready...” Sakura was grinning as she shifted her weight, a feral light in her eyes. “Begin!”

The three broke off in different directions, each preteen quickly losing track of the others as Kakashi stayed, positioned in the very centre of the clearing. Sakura headed into the trees, jumping from branch to branch and flipping through the hand signs for a henge instinctively. It settled over her like a ripple of cold water on her skin and she fitted herself to perch in between a mass of leaves.

The problem with using a henge for disguise was that it required a steady stream of chakra to maintain. As with every technique, slightly too much chakra would naturally be used, causing some to bleed off into the surrounding environment and acting like neon lights to trained senses. It was why henges were rarely used against shinobi, they were simply too easy to spot.

For Sakura, with her natural talent in chakra control that she'd been training from the moment she'd found out what chakra manipulation was, she could regulate her chakra consumption *exactly* until there was zero bleed off. Something that was unheard of for most jōnin, let alone a genin.

She wouldn't change her physical form- she still needed to move as quickly as possible at a moments notice- but she could borrow from Tristan's world and change her colours to blurs of different browns and green. Break up her outline and blend herself further into the background as she dropped her chakra signature to something similar to a squirrel's. It wouldn't hold off against Hatake's well-trained senses, but it would at the very least be a good depiction of her potential.

She perched perfectly still, and watched the figure in the clearing to see who would make the first move. Unsurprisingly, it was the Uzumaki.

"COME HERE!!" The orange blob cried, standing a few metres away from an exasperated Hatake. "AND FIGHT ME!!" Naruto dove towards the man, insulted his haircut, only to freeze when he shoved a hand into an obvious pouch on his hip. Sakura watched as Hatake- hilariously- pulled out a copy of 'Icha Icha' instead of a weapon, only working to completely piss off the orange blob, and then soundly beat the idiot up without once looking up from the page.

It was only really when *eight fully solid Uzumaki's* burst from the water that Sakura's interest was caught. She didn't know what that technique was but she could tell how chakra intensive it must have been. With her own reserves she was pretty sure just making *one* of those things with kill her and the Uzumaki made eight without even flinching. *This* was why the jinchūriki were considered weapons. If he could do this without even touching the bijuu's chakra then he would be able to level entire *countries* when he reached his prime.

Sakura watched- slightly incredulous- as he even created a reasonably smart plan. If the kid could be taught to think more than only one step ahead then he would be a force to reckon with. Instead, he fell straight into the jōnin's trap and Hatake was attacked by Sasuke, launching the pair of them into an overly dramatic showdown whilst Uzumaki continued to swing wildly from the trap he'd gotten stuck in.

Sakura's mind raced. She could stay put, hope the jōnin wouldn't find her (impossible) and when he did would subsequently attack her

rather than just keeping tabs on her location (unlikely), or she could try to get closer to the boys and find an opening to go on the offensive.

She smiled and launched herself to the next branch, heading for the sound of throwing weapons in the distance. She arrived within eyesight in time to see a flare of fire and Sasuke to get pulled down to his neck in the ground. There was something innately hilarious about using an incredibly deadly assassination technique- usually something that would crush the victim's body completely, leaving only a severed head behind- to harmlessly bury upstart genin.

"Shinobi lesson number three: ninjutsu." Hatake said, crouched in front of the head. Sakura leapt to the next branch, trying to edge around the two to the jōnin's side with the bells. "Well, you're already way-" Hatake's head snapped upwards, eye zeroing in on her position with a frightening intensity, before he disappeared completely.

Sakura gritted her teeth and rushed through the kawarimi hand signs, executing three random jumps through the woods in record time and settling in behind a bush, chokutō drawn and eyes darting around rapidly. Her pulse was hammering and her breathing was quickened but her hand was steady on the hilt of the blade as she searched for any sign of the wayward jōnin.

"Behind you." A voice said and she spun, coming face to face with the silver haired man.

The leaves around her began to spin unnaturally, but she was already forming the hand sign and saying "kai" as she leapt towards him. Her sword slashed towards his pulse point but he blocked it with an armoured hand. She stabbed at a kidney, forcing him to dance sideways as she threw a trio of shuriken that he blocked. She pressed the attack. Her blade flashing through the air as the jōnin ducked and dodged and weaved. A manic grin was stretching her face as she pushed herself faster and faster and faster.

She *loved* being a shinobi.

Kakashi shifted mid movement, apparently bored with dodging and planning to go onto the offensive but Sakura had been waiting for it and she sent a too-big pulse of chakra to her foot, causing the earth beneath it to explode outwards and send a wave of dust straight into his line of sight.

A flickering of hand signs sent a clone jumping through the mess and

another- almost instantaneous set- kawarimi'd with a bush behind the jōnin, hand reaching for the bells tied to his waist.

She almost got one. Felt and gripped the string beneath her fingers before he completely disappeared and a weight was pressing on her back, pinning her to the dirt. Before she could register what had happened she was bound and slung over the man's shoulder as he sped towards the centre of the training ground.

"That was a good use of the main three." Hatake said. "You almost got me, but your hold on your chakra loosened as you got absorbed into the fight, making it too easy to follow your position."

"Thank you, sensei." Sakura smiled at the praise, letting the henge drop and her chakra signature unravel fully- and the jōnin was right, it had brightened as she'd lost concentration, something she'd have to work on- as she slumped into her position, watching the blurred trees pass them by as she carefully fiddled with the ropes binding her hands.

Soon they made it to the centre, launching from the trees and landing gracefully on top of the memorial stone, where a laughing Naruto was sitting over the as of yet unopened bento boxes.

"What do you think you're doing?" Hatake asked and Naruto shrunk into himself. In a blink of the eye, the blonde was kicked across the clearing and the bentos were safely balanced on the jōnin's free hand.

Five things happened at once. The Uzumaki jumped up and roared with anger, the Uchiha burst from the tree line, Sakura finished wriggling out of the ropes on her wrists and snatched towards a bell, a pale, gloved hand plucked the bells off his belt and out of her reach and the alarm signalling the coming of noon went off.

"AH DAMMIT!" The jinchūriki screamed.

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Ten minutes later and an extremely indignant Uzumaki was tied to the stump, Sakura and the Uchiha on either side. Uchiha had simply stomped over to his spot and had scowled indignantly at the ground ever since, but Sakura had been placed there. A bento pushed into her hands and her head pat. She recognised it was meant as a bribe to go along with the act, Hatake was clearly setting things up for the Uchiha to accept teamwork and subsequently pass them, but it was so blatantly obvious the man had had no actual interaction with children

before that she had to stifle giggles. He had defaulted into treating her like a particularly well-behaved dog.

“About the training.” Hatake said, arms crossed and an overblown look of disappointment on his sliver of visible face. “Well, there’s no need for you three to go back to the academy.”

Predictably, Uzumaki begun loudly celebrating their success prematurely, only to begin loudly protesting when the jōnin told them they shouldn’t be ninjas. Sakura looked between the overdramatic scene- which had lead to the boys evidently forgetting her existence entirely as they traded angry glances and acted like idiots, only to get some much needed advice- and the bento in her hands.

She may have eaten breakfast but she *had* worked up a killer appetite.

It was an easy choice to fade into the background and begin eating, savouring the high quality Akimichi bento. It was like watching a particularly entertaining tennis match, Naruto kept putting his foot in his mouth and making a fool of himself as Hatake kept giving quality life advice in the form of insults. She finished her two thirds of the bento just in time to watch Sasuke thrust his food towards the tied up and physically unable to take it Naruto and clumsily try to justify his sentimentality with logic.

Sakura smiled, snorted, and stood to untie the Uzumaki.

“Hey, Hey! Sakura-chan what are you doing?!” Uzumaki cried even as he immediately launched himself towards the food. Sakura chuckled.

“We’ll just tie you up again before sensei comes back.” She said but the boys were already round cheeked and fully concentrated on scarfing down food.

Hatake was kind enough to let them finish before he came rolling in like a natural disaster, a careful combination of Killing intent, sheer speed, and a brilliant glare to kick their flight or fight instincts into high alert.

“YOU GUYS...” His genjutsu distorted voice screeched, sending a wave of goosebumps down Sakura’s arms. Uzumaki was screaming in pure terror as he scrambled backwards into the pole, whilst the Uchiha had shifted into the beginnings of a taijutsu stance, but one noticeably designed for evasion and retreat.

“... pass ♡” The jōnin finished, eye smile in place and radiating sheer,

sadistic enjoyment at them.

Sakura, pumped full of adrenaline and still riding the high of a good meal, broke down into giggles. High pitched, girly, slightly hysterical giggles. She blamed mess of hormones her pre-puberty body had become. Hatake used one hand to ruffle her hair and the other to give a Maito Gai worthy thumbs up.

“That ends training. Tomorrow team seven will take its very first mission!”

“WHAT?!” Uzumaki screamed. Sakura managed to calm down. Uchiha looked like he might be in shock.

“You all pass. You guys are the first.” Hatake explained. “Everyone else would just blindly do whatever I told them. A ninja must see underneath the underneath.” He leaned in and his voice turned serious. “Remember, those who break the rules are trash, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash.”

“Though pinky here gets an A.” He said as they collected their bags. “You two get a C minus.”

“What, why?!” Uzumaki spluttered, puffed up and red cheeked with indigence. The Uchiha made a particularly offended sounding huff.

“She did her research.” Hatake said matter of factly, leading them into the village like a pack of baby ducklings. “You two went into unknown territory blind.”

“What does that even mean?!”

Travelling to Wave and Making Allies

Chapter Summary

In which Sakura blackmails her sensei, almost kills the Uchiha and stabs at a very unfashionable arm warmer.

Sakura could admit she was bored. It had been three weeks since they had begun ‘training’ under the copy-nin and they’d done nothing more than multiple D-ranks every day. Sure, he’d mixed in some team based drills as they did them, training their cohesiveness as a unit, and he’d been providing her with a series of jōnin level restricted chakra theory texts to read that Sakura was 90% sure were illegal to even take out of their section in the library, let alone remove them from the building and lend them to your twelve-year old genin (though they were *very* interesting reads, a lot of them were breakdowns from the work Orochimaru had done, definitely not kid-friendly but Sakura was well on her way to performing untraceable kawarimis and being able to mimic different shinobi’s chakra signatures- something that could reinvent how shinobi approached infiltration). But mostly it was just an endless series of menial tasks and no actual lessons.

He seemed to be pushing them towards some kind of emotional reconciliation through hardship. Sakura understood, but wasn’t particularly enjoying the process.

Hence, when the Uzumaki began screaming about getting something interesting to do- whilst she didn’t agree with the method of delivery- she found herself internally agreeing with the sentiment.

“If you want it that much, I’ll give you a c-rank mission.” The hokage said, showing absolute favouritism towards the Uzumaki rather than punishing them for massive insubordination as any other member of the village would be for screaming at him. Sakura sighed, figured she should just be glad that she was in a team with the Hokage’s soft spot and tried not to worry too much about the genuine stress in Hatake’s frame.

That did not, however, prevent her from getting a flash of déjà vu as the old drunk walked into the room and *knowing* that their first c-rank was going to go to shit.

“Oi! Kakashi!” The gate guard called, making the jōnin- only fifteen minutes late in deference to their client- eye where Sakura was standing in front of the booth warily as he handed in their mission papers. “You didn’t say you had such an adorable genin on your team!”

Sakura let a light blush build on her cheeks and her already sweet smile turn angelic. The other guard leant in with a serious expression on his face.

“You be careful now, a genin’s first c-rank is a big milestone. Just do your best to protect your client and you’ll do great.” He told her and she dropped her expression into comically determined. As expected, the chūnin looked at her like she was an adorable, small animal.

“Thank you, senpai! I’ll do my best!” She said, laying a pair of cookies on the desk and hurrying to catch up where Hatake was walking through the gates.

“Take care of our cute little kohai, Hatake!” The bandaged one called after the jōnin who waved lazily behind him in response before focusing his attention down on the, now skipping alongside him, girl.

“I didn’t know you were close with Kotetsu and Izumo.” He said, voice bland but eye narrowed as if faced with a particularly difficult puzzle.

“I wasn’t.” She said, smiling up at the jōnin. “But when I asked about sign-out procedures for missions they were extremely helpful.”

“Kotetsu and Izumo.” He replied, tone full of disbelief. “Helpful.”

“Extremely helpful!” She said and offered him the brown paper bag she was holding. “Cookie, sensei?”

He (slowly) took one and observed her consideringly. “I’ll leave the Client to you, then.”

Sakura nodded and bounded forward to where the Uzumaki was- unsurprisingly- in a shouting match with the drunk over something ridiculous and the Uchiha was- unhelpfully- brooding into the distance.

“Am I really going to be safe with this brat?” The old man said angrily, glaring back at Hatake, but Sakura intercepted the conversation.

“You’re actually in very good hands, Tazuna-san.” She said, drawing a look that could only be described as doubtful. “Sasuke-kun and I both graduated at the top of our class, and Naruto has the largest chakra reserves in the village.” She pointed to the blonde, who was staring back at her looking teary eyed from the basic and slightly backhanded compliment. “Not to mention our jōnin-sensei is one of the strongest shinobi in Konoha.”

“WAIT, He is?!” Uzumaki cried, pointing at Hatake. Even Uchiha- who up until this point had been stomping ahead of them and brooding into the distance- glanced back at the jōnin in surprise. Sakura huffed, apparently they still hadn’t done their research, but felt her interest pique at the dramatic sigh of relief the old drunk made. A sigh that was extremely disproportionate to the low ranking of the mission.

“Maa Naruto, I’m hurt, why so surprised?” Hatake drawled, a hand over his heart.

“But you’re just a lazy old pervert!” Uzumaki yelled accusingly.

“This mission is only a c-rank, so we won’t be coming across any foreign ninja, and we’ll easily be able to take care of anything else.” Sakura continued, completely ignoring where the blonde was now being noogied by the man responsible for their safety. She did *not* miss the telltale expression of guilt on the Client’s face.

Hatake and Uchiha hadn’t either, judging by the latter’s suspicious glare and the former’s casual use of hand signs. Only the Uzumaki seemed entirely oblivious to the fishy nature of the client, loudly yelling and fixing his hair. Hatake’s hand rested lightly by his side, fingers in the information gathering position, and Sakura smiled.

That, she could do.

“So Tazuna-san, you’re from Wave, right?” She asked, face guileless.

“Yeah, what about it?!” He snapped defensively, taking an angry sip from his sake bottle. Sakura feigned obliviousness to the mood and let her eyes light up and an excited smile stretch over her face.

“Really? What’s it like? I’ve always wanted to see the ocean!” She said and he visibly softened, smiling a little and slipping into a tale about the country’s main features. She would bet money he had at least one young grandchild, that kind of parental ease was practiced. It was simple to feign interest in the story, ask subtle questions about the economic and political situation in the country and keep him talking

as they walked. By the time the sun was setting and the group was stopping to make camp, Sakura had felt she'd gotten a good picture of the state the country was in, and how likely it was that Tazuna would be targeted by enemy ninja.

The answer, very high.

"Report." Hatake said, having pulled her aside after the client had fallen asleep. He'd been well within hearing range all day so Sakura could only imagine that he was using it as some kind of test. Or, he'd been extremely lazy and hadn't bothered paying attention.

"As far as I can tell, Wave has been overtaken by some kind of criminal group who have used thug violence, threats and Wave's geographic isolation to extort the country deep into poverty. The client is trying to build a bridge between the Land of Fire and Wave country which would remove the country's isolation and subsequently gang's power over the locals, also bringing about a massive economic boom. Tazuna, as the driving force behind the project, is enemy number one to the criminal sect and it's highly likely we'll encounter resistance well beyond a c-rank."

The jōnin nodded, scratching his chin. "Do you think we should quit the mission?" Sakura paused, considering the question fully.

"No. I think we should continue." She said and his lone eye sharpened.

"Oh, why's that?"

"Thirty two percent of Fire Country's annual seafood consumption is imported from Wave, the economic benefits of a bridge would be a boon to us as well, not to mention the massive strategic advantage of bridging halfway to Kiri." She said and Hatake nodded. "Any enemy shinobi we encounter are most likely to be Kiri missing-nin who recently deserted, with the current political climate of the Hidden Village less and less jōnin level Kirigakure shinobi have been added the bingo books each year and they've shown a marked decrease in successful missions taken outside the Land of Water. Hence, whilst it would be dangerous to continue the mission knowing it would be well above the capabilities of an average genin team, the chances of encountering a hostile shinobi capable of taking you down are negligible at best and the potential pros far outweigh the cons." Sakura's eyes narrowed in thought. "Was that why we were given this mission? Tazuna only paid for a c-rank so Konoha couldn't give him

more than a genin team without showing preferential treatment, but putting the Copy-nin on a straight forward protection detail is the closest to ensuring the mission's success as you could get. The only equivalent option would be Team Gai, but they're out of the village."

Hatake stared down at her, eye wide before it narrowed dramatically.

"And how would you know if Gai is in the village?" His voice was low with warning and he had begun radiating a low level of killing intent. Sakura snorted.

"Every time you two go through with one of your ridiculous challenges they become the focus of the rumour mill for days. There hasn't been any stories of a challenge in over two weeks, hence Maito Gai must be out of the village." Sakura felt a menacing smile twist her mouth and she put on a faux innocent tone. "Don't worry sensei!" He shifted his weight to lean away from her, eye widening in alarm. "If I happen to introduce myself to Konoha's Sublime Green Beast of Prey, I'll be sure to let him know just how much you've been singing his praises and pass on the invitation for his team to join us at practice, we both know you're just too shy to ask him yourself."

Maa, Sakura-chan." Hatake said, hand landing on her shoulder as he steered her back towards the campsite. "There's no need to go to such extreme lengths. I'll take over the watch tonight, you make sure you get plenty of beauty sleep." His grip tightened near painfully, "Alright?"

Sakura's smile widened. "Of course sensei, those books you've been lending me have kept me too busy to do much of anything, anyway."

As Hatake was wandering away she heard him mutter "worse than my black ops minions."

(He sounded almost proud)

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The next morning passed in much the same manner as the day previous, with Sakura focusing her questions away from the economic climate of Wave and onto the influential figures in the community.

(Not necessarily the richest ones, but the little old ladies that everyone knows and the tavern waitress that people look forward to chatting with. The people who know the most about the comings and goings of the town, and are always happy to share it.)

It wasn't until that afternoon that they passed a mysterious puddle. Sitting as it was under the hot summer sun, in a particularly dry forest, Sakura figured whoever was hiding in it couldn't be above low chūnin. Seeing Hatake put his hand in the position for 'defend and observe' she moved closer to Tazuna, ready to protect the client in the inevitable fight.

Watching the two missing-nin appear and 'kill' Kakashi was interesting and Sakura mentally made a note to blackmail him into teaching her that genjutsu later as she drew her chokutō and settled into a defensive position in front of the client. Strictly speaking Sakura should be positioned on the client's left flank, with the Uzumaki in front and the Uchiha on the right, but her teammates were both AWOL; the Uzumaki having been completely oblivious and frozen up at the first taste of adrenaline and the Uchiha having missed Hatake's hand signals and thrown himself head first into danger at the first sign of a fight.

Perhaps she was being too harsh on the Uchiha. He had protected the blonde with an admittedly impressive aim, it was just hard to take the kid seriously when he put as much visible angst as possible into every movement. One of the missing-nin headed for the Uzumaki whilst the other circled towards the client, specifically trying to duck around her positioning to get at the old man. She shifted her weight and arced her blade, prepared to block, only for the Uchiha to dramatically throw himself in front of her as some kind of human shield and Hatake to appear and grab the pair of enemy shinobi.

He turned a lone, incensed eye on the black haired boy, who straightened slightly under the scrutiny.

"Sasuke." Hatake said. "Whilst I applaud your willingness to protect your teammates, do turn around."

The Uchiha looked over his shoulder and blanched. Sakura glared back at him, slowly moving her blade away from where it had been centimetres from his unprotected kidneys, having only barely been able to stop her swing before it injured the preteen.

"Always respect a kenjutsu user, if Pinky had been just a tiny bit less competent you'd be dead." The jōnin said, voice entirely matter of fact. "Nice job Sakura. Naruto, sorry for not helping you right away, I didn't expect you to freeze up like that. Their claws are soaked in poison, we have to remove it from your blood quickly. Tazuna." The jōnin turned the full force of his glare on the old man.

“Wh-what is it?”

“I need to talk to you.”

Sakura sighed and stepped away from the client, sheathing her sword and stretching her back out, enjoying watching Hatake rip the old drunk to shreds. “Naruto will need medical treatment, we have to get him to a doctor!” She interjected, voice full of false earnesty and watching the way the old drunk visibly panicked. She might’ve felt some actual worry for her blonde teammate, but judging by the way Hatake had made a big deal out of it only to waste time talking, it was probably a ploy and Naruto was not actually in danger.

The Uzumaki stabbing himself was a surprise, and the wound certainly looked showy, with swathes of blood over the back of his hand, but it very noticeably stopped pouring blood surprisingly quickly. Normal human bodies did *not* clot that quickly.

Sakura would *know*.

She watched the surprise on the jōnin’s slither of face as he bandaged the wound and knew he’d noticed it too. Was it a jinchūriki thing? Did the fox give the blonde a ridiculously abnormal healing rate? What was it’s limit? Could it regrow organs? Limbs?

Sometimes Sakura wished Orochimaru was still in the village, just so she could send him research ideas.

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“GET DOWN!” Hatake yelled. Sakura reacted instinctively, grabbing the orange ball on her way and hitting the ground. A distant part of her mind noted the Uchiha doing the same for the client.

The air rushed over her. The giant sword made an audible squealing through the space above them. It buried itself into a tree with a massive thunk and Sakura looked up to find a giant, terrifying man standing upon the massive hilt. Long limbs and thick muscle. Standing with a predatory surety that wasn’t dissimilar to Hatake’s lazy slouch.

But where Hatake was predatory in the manner of an expertly trained dog that ripped out throats on command, an ultimately gentle creature that happened to be highly deadly when motivated, the man on the sword was a wild, bloodthirsty animal on a very short, very thin leash. Every shift of his body pulsated with barely restrained violence.

For all her research and all her training, Sakura didn't put together the face and the sword until Hatake named him. When he did her heart rate picked up. Momochi Zabuza was a *threat*.

"Surround and protect Tazuna. Do not enter the fight. That is the teamwork here." Hatake said and Sakura moved into action, flowing smoothly into position and drawing her blade. She expected at least the Uchiha to follow her movement but both of the preteens were staring wide-eyed at Hatake as he revealed his Sharingan. She felt her teeth grit involuntarily.

"The man who has copied a thousand jutsu, 'copy-nin Kakashi'." Zabuza was saying, his voice like steel wool. "Now. I have to kill that old man." Finally, *finally*, the boys fell into their defensive positions. "But Kakashi, it seems I will have to go through you first." With that the missing-nin disappeared.

Sakura's mind raced, her brain desperately piecing together every tiny scrap of information on the threat. Disturbingly little came to mind.

"He'll come after me first." Hatake said and Sakura's attention caught, eyes roving the surface of the water where the Kiri Shinobi had disappeared. "Momochi Zabuza, as a member of the hidden mist he was known as an expert in silent killing. You don't even notice until you're already dead. It's not like I can use the Sharingan perfectly. You guys be careful."

The mist thickened, rolling in from the water. Visibility plummeted.

"8 Choices." A disembodied voice boomed around them as it slowly became difficult to see past their own hands.

An assassination expert, faced with a Hatake Kakashi who's already gotten serious. Zabuza was trying to eliminate the effectiveness of the Sharingan with the mist.

"Liver, lungs, spine, femoral vein, jugular, brain, kidneys, heart."

Though he was making a show of going after Hatake, ultimately his objective was the client, Zabuza could simply go after the old man but whilst he would likely be able to kill Tazuna he wouldn't be able to do it fast enough to prevent Hatake from killing him in return. What would an assassin do?

"Which one should I go after?"

Exploit Hatake's weaknesses. Go after the children. Force him out of position.

A wall of killing intent slammed into Sakura. Her blood pounded like fire through her veins. Her breathing quickened. Her hands were steady on her blade.

A manic smile stretched her face. She shifted further onto the bridge builder's flank.

"I don't let my comrades die." The distraction said and Sakura moved. Her hands were a blur of hand signs and she disappeared into the mist. Her chakra signature slammed to nothing and the familiar feeling of water rushing over her skin followed. The clone stuttered for a moment, eyes tracking her movement, before it was being slammed into by Hatake's distraction. The real Zabuza wouldn't have had time to notice.

A Sakura-clone jumped away from the mess, landing as though pushed like the others.

"It's over." Hatake said, kunai at Zabuza's throat. Sakura's mind whirled as she disappeared into the bushes.

"There is no way you can defeat me with your monkey like limitations." Zabuza was saying. Was he stalling? Was it megalomania?

Why hadn't Kakashi killed him yet?

"But that was impressive of you! At that time you had already copied my water clone jutsu." Zabuza was still talking and Hatake was just letting him. It couldn't be a clone, the Sharingan would tell him, but why wasn't he killing the missing-nin? "You had your clone say those words to attract my attention while the real you hid in the mist and watched."

Sakura's breath caught. The pieces clicked into place. It was another clone stalling until the real Zabuza made a move. Hatake was going along with it, waiting for the assassin to overplay his hand.

"Nice plan. But." The clones eyes were feral, even a fake Zabuza was terrifying. Sakura's smile widened were she hid, her clone cowering in the dirt and gaining exactly zero attention. If the assassin paid half a lick of mind to it it would be obvious it was a clone, but the man was arrogant. Sakura was just a small, pink haired and defenceless little

girl. Why would he bother?

“I’m not that easy.” The real Zabuza said, appearing behind Hatake and taking a swing.

Hatake dodged the swing but he took the kick, a pale hand digging into a weapons pouch and leaving a protective trail of makibishi before the client as he went. Zabuza growled and gave chase, effectively putting a massive amount of space between the fight and the weaknesses.

It was a good plan from Hatake, right up until the water started trying to suck him back in as he climbed out, buying Zabuza just enough time to trap their sensei in a water prison.

“Now Kakashi, we can finish this later, but first. I’ll take care of them.” Zabuza said and turned his attention onto the terrified looking group of kids. Hatake’s crimson eye flicked over Sakura’s clone, locked onto her actual position in the trees on his left, and then pointedly looked away again. Sakura figured she could take that as permission and begun threading out her chakra.

For most shinobi, the Kawarimi worked like something of a field. As the shinobi went through the requisite hand signs, their chakra would expand outwards in a circle, coating everything around them in a layer of it. They would then mentally picture the item they wanted to swap with and perform their last hand sign. This would cause their chakra to ‘catch’ and result in the switch. It made the move completely instantaneous, but also extremely easy to track. Anyone within the field would feel the catch the moment it happened, acting like a beacon to point them in the right direction.

The jōnin reading materials Hatake had been slipping her worked on teaching the user to send out only a sector of chakra, significantly reducing the size of the field and hopefully keeping the attackers outside it, hence making them unable to follow their movements.

Sakura, with near perfect chakra control from natural talent and long hours of practice as a baby, had been perfecting the ability to send out just a string- almost invisible with how little chakra she could put into it- to connect with her target object, using that to feed a coat of chakra over it and then perform the catch.

It was near untraceable, and she’d gotten damn good at it.

So she sent a string of chakra out, pushing it below the surface of the

water to hide it even further, and connected to her chosen object, coating it painstakingly slowly with chakra as Zabuza bragged. She finished just in time to see the Uzumaki get kicked in the head. She didn't let the technique catch. Not yet. She would need a distraction.

"Take Tazuna and run!! You have no chance of beating him!" Hatake screamed. "As long as he's keeping me trapped here he can't move! The water clone cannot go very far from his real body! Just run away!"

She was almost certain the Sharingan was able to see what she was doing with her chakra. Won't be able to kill him? Force him to move from keeping me trapped? Sakura's smile went unhinged. Definitely permission. She watched Naruto become increasingly DETERMINED with a tingling sense of anticipation.

Then, Naruto was running. Almost everyone was screaming. Sakura waited until just the point when the blonde was kicked away from the danger before she let her chakra catch.

Kubikiribōchō disappeared and reappeared in the trees. A brown and green mottled figure appeared on the missing-nin's back. Sakura's chokutō made a vicious slash towards the man's ridiculous arm warmer.

He dodged it of course, Sakura was still just a genin and he was a jōnin, but he was forced to pull his arm out of the water prison to do so. She had gone through the hand signs and disappeared again- replaced with a log this time and using the usual full field- before she hit the water. Zabuza made a move in her new direction, violence in his eyes and a pounding vein on his forehead, but Kakashi stopped him with a crushing grip on the missing-nin's wrist, rising out of the water like a true demon.

Sakura laughed slightly hysterically and let her clone and henge drop, watching with undisguised awe as the two jōnin went at each other with everything, the fight becoming its own natural disaster. Hatake managing to not only perform massive feats of ninjutsu, but also simultaneously mess with the guy psychologically.

Sakura felt her resolve harden. One day, she would be that good.

Then senbon pierced Zabuza's neck.

"Hehe, you're right, he's dead." A childish voice sounded, the black clothes figure appearing out of the trees. Hatake shunshined to the

dead man's side and felt for a pulse, evidently finding none.

"Thank you very much, I have been searching for the opportunity to kill Zabuza for a long time." The child said, something about it just screaming *wrong* to Sakura.

"That mask." Hatake replied. "You're a hidden mist hunter-nin."

"Impressive. You are correct."

"Hunter-nin?!" Uzumaki interjected, a mulish expression on his face.

"Yes my duty is to hunt down missing-nins. I'm a member of the hidden mist's hunter-nin team." The kid said, his voice polite. Sakura's eyes narrowed and the problem she had with the picture clicked. She didn't care what the kid said, who he poked full of holes or what elite assassination squad he was apparently apart of. The kid was not a killer. He had none of the inherent violence, none of the predatory stance, nothing but a genuinely polite attitude. She would always recognise one of her own, and she didn't recognise this kid.

Kiri would have chewed this kid up and spit him out without a second thought. *Bullshit* he was a super elite assassin. He was a teammate of Zabuza's that had just used senbon to fake the man's death.

Sakura took a half step forward before she paused. She knew that if she attacked the kid Hatake would follow through, she'd definitely shown her judgment was good enough for him to trust her decisions, but she eyed the way he was subtly using the 'hair ruffle' to lean his weight on the blonde. Essentially using Uzumaki as a living walking stick.

Hatake was on the verge of chakra exhaustion, they had no way of knowing how strong the kid was and at the very least Zabuza would need time to recover before attacking again. The kid said goodbye. Sakura let him go.

"Now we have to get Tazuna back home." Hatake said, pulling his forehead protector back down, and Sakura rushed to his side. "Lets GO!!" He yelled before promptly collapsing, Sakura caught him just before he hit the dirt.

"Oof." She said and turned to a screaming Naruto. "Help me out? Sensei's really heavy."

Before she could argue the man was removed from her hands

completely, the boys somehow both working together to carry him and turning it into a competition.

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“The hunter-nin’s protect information from getting out. They are the specialists who guard their village’s secrets.” Hatake lectured.

“Sensei.” Sakura interrupted, tone flat, and the single grey eye turned to look at her.

“Sakura.” Hatake replied equally deadpan. “Why do I feel like you’re going to say something I’m not going to like?”

“The supposed Kiri hunter-nin was exceedingly polite to us, a group of Konoha shinobi.” Sakura replied, causing an expression of dawning horror to appear on Hatake’s sliver of visible face. “They also didn’t dispose of the ‘body’, they took it. And Kubikiribōchō. I checked.”

Hatake closed his eye, took a deep breath, and whispered “fuck” with great feeling.

Death to the Bourgeoisie Scum

Chapter Summary

A grumpy SAKURA appeared!

HYPOCRITE sent out ANNOYING TRIPE!

SAKURA's Killing Intent cuts ANNOYING TRIPE's attack!

SAKURA used Generic Facts!

It's super effective!

HYPOCRITE escaped using Run Away!

Sakura watched the man approach the Client with a cloying sense of distaste. He was the third worker that day to quit, but the first to make such a scene. She really didn't care about the ethics of ditching your long-time friend to protect yourself, but the hypocrisy of his yelling really pissed her off.

It didn't help that she was sporting a migraine, a result of Hatake's ridiculous training method.

(He'd decided that, since she'd already demonstrated her ability to tree climb during the bell test, she could focus on her multitasking abilities. She'd had to spend the day sticking to the top of the railing with chakra whilst trying to maintain string-fed chakra coatings on three separate objects and fluctuating her signature. It was akin to trying to write two separate novels with each hand whilst reading a third and listening to an audiobook.)

"I want to help you but if we continue this Gatou will notice us. And what's the point if you get killed?" The Hypocrite was saying, all righteous indignation and arrogance. "Why don't we quit building the bridge?" His voice softened like he was talking down a particularly stubborn child. Seeing the defeated slump in the Client's shoulders, (and hence the increasing possibility work would slow down and she would spend even longer in the god-forsaken town) her tentative control over her annoyance snapped. The boards she'd coated in chakra shook as she threw herself off the railing and stalked towards the Hypocrite.

"Oi, asshole!" She said, the men watching the commotion looked over

at the pink-haired, pastel clothed little girl death glaring and swearing at the Hypocrite in surprise. The Hypocrite turned to her, a mixture of confusion and offence on his face. "If you're going to run away like a coward with your tail between your legs then do it quietly! Some of us have better shit to do than listen to your hypocritical tripe!"

The Hypocrite spluttered down at where she'd stopped in front of him- placing herself in between the potential threat and the Client- before puffing up with undeserved pride and growing red faced. "There's no point to the bridge if we lose our lives!" He yelled into her face, like that justified being a nuisance. Sakura was Unimpressed. She sighed and rubbed a temple.

"No." She said, pronouncing her words slowly so that there couldn't be any possible confusion. "There's no point to the bridge *for you* if you are dead. The bridge will still bring new resources to the community if you are dead. The bridge will still circumvent the isolationist nature of your country that's allowed Gatou and his thugs to gain such a foothold if you are dead. And the bridge will still provide a massive economic boom for future generations if you are dead. Frankly, the bridge and its *point* doesn't give two shits if you're alive and if you don't stop screaming, me and my migraine will be perfectly happy to throw you off the fucking thing." She smiled a toothy, threatening smile. A potent level of killing intent seeped into the air. "Wether you're alive or *dead*."

The Hypocrite paled, became overcome by his own cowardice and scampered in the direction of the village. For some inexplicable reason the men around her seemed to take this as a fantastic motivational speech rather than a generic stating of facts and threat to one of their own's life, cheering exuberantly and going about their work twice as enthusiastically as they had previously.

Sakura stomped back to her railing angrily, threw herself on top of the thing and growled under her breath when she realised she'd lost her hold of both the chakra coatings and the halfway point she'd been holding her signature at.

Her lips curled into a snarl and she went back to work all while picturing a series of more and more violent deaths for her sensei.

(The utter ass had the gall to look amused when she spent dinnertime alternating between rubbing her temples and glaring a hole in the side of his idiotic, silver head.)

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It was on the third day of training that she talked again, having completely retreated into sullen silence with the haze of migraines and chakra control exercises. The Client had stopped in front of her perch for far longer than usual, causing her to crack an eye open questionably.

“I would have thought you guys would take shifts or something.” The gruff drunk said, one hand scratching his scraggly beard. “Why aren’t the blonde and the other one on bodyguard duty?”

“They’re training.” She replied, tone flat. It did nothing to deter the old man.

“You don’t have to?” He asked, she scowled.

“I am also training. My training just involves a lot less running and jumping and making a fool of myself, so I can do it here rather than having to train in the woods where they won’t get in the way.”

“Uh huh.” The man nodded. “And you’ll be enough to handle any ninja Gatou sends after me?”

“Tazuna-san.” Sakura said, tone serious. “If Gatou had anymore shinobi to send after you, those shinobi would be stronger than Momochi and would have been sent four days ago, the moment he learnt that his last attempt had failed. I can assure you that if that had happened, we would be dead.” The old man grimaced at hearing this, but for a point in his favour he didn’t piss himself in fear or anything particularly pathetic. “That we are still breathing means that Gatou currently has nothing better than petty thugs and common samurai left in his arsenal, people that might as well be kittens for all the danger they pose to me.”

For some inexplicable reason the old man laughed heartily. “I like your moxie kid!” He declared like protection detail was some kind of inane popularity test before wandering off to return to the work he was meant to be doing in the first place.

Sakura watched his retreating back incredulously before she felt her hold on a coating slip and she returned to her exercises with a frown.

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Sakura didn’t speak again that week. In fact, Sakura didn’t register the

much of the world outside of her training and making sure the Client didn't die. She had vague impressions of a hormonal pissing match going on between the boys and a small, annoying child but other than that she really couldn't tell you any details about her days.

What she did remember was the triumphant feeling in her chest as she went to bed that seventh night. The knowledge that she'd worked her ass off and as a result her coating process had become near instinctual, her mind keeping track of three different objects at a time with ease, and she'd eliminated the need for hand signs to perform the jutsu altogether. Her control over her signature had massively improved, and maintaining it in a near invisible state had become second nature even as she focused on other things. Her favourite part was that she'd figured out how to maintain her various chakra coats *through* a kawarimi, meaning she could effectively perform three instantaneous, untraceable switches before she needed to reset her technique. It was a drain on her chakra to maintain a hold on three coats for long periods, but with her control only putting in the absolute minimum for the technique to occur it was almost negligible.

When Hatake ruffled her hair and told her she'd done well, she didn't put on the most optimal expression and think through a hundred different situations. No. Sakura smiled. A smile that was little more than a small uptick in the corners of her mouth but was also real and filled with warmth. And she felt Pride.

His answering eye-smile seemed a little softer in response.

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The bridge was eerie in the early morning mist, bodies strewn haphazardly over the concrete and the last blush of the orange dawn gleaming in the metallic edges.

Sakura stood next to Hatake and the Uchiha, a vaguely disgruntled expression on her face. They had completely cleared the bridge of work materials, making her newly perfected kawarimi techniques far less useful in the oncoming fight. It didn't help her mood that the conveniently strewn bodies turned out to be clones, either, though it was interesting to see how far the Uchiha had progressed in the past week.

Still, it was hard not to break into a smile when the adrenaline was pumping and violence was imminent, even if it was slightly subdued with the knowledge that Hatake wanted to put her on guard duty.

She understood. She *did*. For all that she'd held back in her scoring on the physical side of things during the academy, her and the Uchiha were pretty much on par with each other. The only reason she was above him over all was that she didn't think like a preteen and was far more creative, knowing how to use her versatility and chakra control to gain every possible advantage. Against a likely equally skilled opponent who had already witnessed and would know how to counter her fighting style; the Uchiha, with his giant chakra reserves and ability to simply brute force his way through things, would have a greater chance of winning the inevitable battle of attrition.

Sakura understood the logic. But that didn't stop her blade from feeling thirsty beneath her hands, nor the rise of bloodlust in response to the killing intent.

It was alright, though. She could be patient. She didn't last sixty three years as Tristan without patience.

Uchiha and the Accomplice launched themselves at each other, meeting in a flurry of weaponry and taijutsu. The explosion of ice senbon was as impressive as it was strange but it wasn't until the Accomplice pulled out an outright Kekai Genkai that Sakura actually questioned the decision to leave Sasuke to face the kid alone. She was just considering abandoning the Client to join the fight against the Accomplice when a burst of smoke, a cloud of shuriken and a distinctive yell made her relax back into position again.

"Uzumaki Naruto! Has finally arrived!!" The orange ball cried. His entrance was loud, showy and attention grabbing but it was undeniably the Uzumaki and Sakura knew the pair would be fine. Of everyone in Konoha, the pair had the greatest potential for strength and they knew each other inside out. In a few years, if the Uchiha didn't let his angst get in the way, they would be unbeatable.

She regulated her breathing, threw a series of coated kunai in strategic positions, and focused on the fight that would affect her most.

(The kunai were only there as possible escape routes, she wasn't yet able to swap with something so disparate from her weight and size without using up most of her chakra.)

"Sorry but I'm going to end this instantly." Baited Hatake, a hand holding onto his forehead protector.

"Sharingan again?" Momochi asked, flaunting his arrogance and obviously poking at the trap. "Is that all you can do?"

There was a blur of movement and a splash of Kakashi's blood before he finally exposed the Sharingan and Zabuza was forced to summon mist once again to counter it. Sakura waited until it was completely opaque white around her before summoning a clone, hinging herself white and completely burying her chakra signature. Her clone was unlikely to be overlooked again, but since she was almost completely invisible- both physically and with chakra- Sakura could very likely count on the pair of enemy shinobi being too busy to actually bother to find her. As her world became restricted to the sounds around her and the radiating warmth of the client, her mind raced through the scope of possibilities.

In the mess of fights it was easy to forget that Zabuza's target was ultimately the bridge builder, but for all the man was filled with prideful boasting and a showy fighting style, he was an assassin famous for silent kills. He knew how to take every advantage and throw out anything prideful or honourable for the duration of the fight.

It was an easy decision to fist a hand in the front of the Client's shirt and wait, her clone making a show of protecting the man's front even as her real eyes watched his back. When Zabuza appeared like the demon of the mist he was named after, Sakura tightened her hold on the man and leapt backwards in time with his swing, unsurprised when Kakashi appeared between them and glad to keep as much distance from the pair as possible.

"Kakashi-sensei!" Her clone screamed, face full of concern for the mildly bleeding man.

"You were too slow Kakashi, did the concern for these brats cloud your mind and make the mist ever thicker?" Zabuza gloated. "Don't worry, I'm about to send you to the same place as them. You can apologise in the next world for lacking the strength to protect them." The missing-nin faded back into the mist, disappearing from sight.

"Sakura." Kakashi said, turning over his shoulder and looking pointedly at the clone. "Stay here." With that he followed the demon into the mist, their quiet taunting melding with the gentle rush of the wind.

Hatake had won- Momochi just didn't know it yet- and the Client was ultimately safe. Sakura had permission to back up the boys. She smiled and begun making her way towards the source of the cold as quietly as possible.

She reached the edge of the mirrors, close enough to peak in to the mist-free dome and see the Uchiha's senbon riddled body and Uzumaki convulsing and clutching his head, when the chakra hit. It turned the very air into acid, rolling off the orange body in visible waves of malevolent red. Sakura stumbled, wavered and almost hit the floor. She was sure it was only the last week of training that kept her henge on and her signature stable even as her brain completely lost all coherency. Her clone was not so lucky, popping at the first hint of corrosive pressure.

Time seemed to pass in a blur, her wide eyes watching Naruto destroy the Accomplice uncomprehendingly, shaky steps following the pair after they smashed through the far line of mirrors.

It wasn't until the chakra abruptly disappeared that Sakura paused, metres from the blurry figures of Naruto and the Accomplice. Naruto frozen mid movement.

Her brain rebooted. Her thoughts came online. She stared incredulously as the pair argued over being essentially unable to kill each other because of sentimentality and their individual moral codes. Once Uzumaki's shouting somehow turned into the Accomplice spilling their life story Sakura accepted she would never understand the pair and rolled with it.

For all she could mimic human behaviours, learn the best faces to gain the best responses and follow observed patterns to decode common scenarios and fake the correct expressions, Sakura had never pretended to actually understand the majority of the population. She was missing far too much of the normal emotional responses, the feelings behind her masks too often completely incorrect for the scenario.

She would never understand, so she didn't even bother to try. She simply assimilated the relevant political information and positioned herself behind the Accomplice, completely unnoticed by both parties as she blended easily into the unnaturally opaque white of the mist. It was painfully obvious that neither party was willing to kill the other.

Sakura would solve that dilemma.

She just had to wait for Naruto to do something loud and distracting to hide her actions behind.

He pulled through to the soundtrack of chirping birds.

The Accomplice blocked the kunai swing, his free hand twisting into a seal, but Sakura's blade was already arcing through the air. The hot shower of blood was already spilling over her face.

The boy dropped. Her smile ached in her cheeks.

Naruto shrieked and grabbed his kunai, face wide with horror as his eyes searched the mist, unable to see her as the crimson red had automatically been absorbed into the white of her henge. Sakura gave a moment to collect herself and school her face blank before she allowed it to drop. The white vanishing to reveal her cutesy, pastel pallet splattered with vivid red. Her poisonously green eyes popping feverishly in her face. Wide and manic despite her best attempts to feign blankness. The hand not holding her dripping chokutō was shaking from the beautiful rush of adrenaline.

Naruto turned green. Sakura figured he needed a distraction.

"Naruto." She said and he flinched. She made an effort to brighten her tone to something more human. "Sasuke should be waking up soon, it would be nice if someone was there when he did."

"B-but he..." Naruto stuttered and a rueful- if slightly too wide- smile pulled at her face. It seemed to calm him somewhat.

"Died? Are you sure? Haku used the same pattern of senbon he used on Zabuza."

He visibly brightened at this, turning to the fallen Uchiha in a rush, tripping over his own feet in his excitement.

Sakura took a moment to admire the image of Kakashi pulling his entire fucking hand out of Zabuza's rib cage before she closed her eyes, tipped her head to the sky and breathed. She focused on calming the pounding of her heart. Deepening her gasping breaths. Locking the monster back inside its box.

It wasn't nearly sated. It would never be sated. But it had gotten a taste. For the first time in twelve years the monster knew blood.

It would become more insistent on regular feeding after this.

"You alright, Sakura-chan?" Hatake asked, breaking through her fog and causing her to jump violently. The visible patch of skin was stubbornly expressing concern, but she could see the crinkling of mirth at her reaction hovering at the edges. Her expression went

deadpan.

"I was fine until you gave me a heart attack, Kakashi-sensei."

"Ah goo..." Hatake went silent and turned to look, expression resigned, at the opposite side of the bridge. Sakura followed his line of sight and frowned at the approaching crowd of what looked suspiciously like gangsters, their figures becoming more and more visible as they moved out of the slowly clearing fog. Hatake stepped forward to meet them, Sakura automatically falling into position on his right flank.

It was clear that the comically short mole man at the front of the mob was the boss. His clothes were neat and expensive- if largely tasteless- where the thugs were wearing a mishmash of rags and armour. His steps across the bridge were short and shuffling but there was a crooked smile on his face. An expression that expected easy deference in the face of a crude threat of violence. He was the kind of man that would sit and laugh as children were beaten to death in front of him, but would be too squeamish to do it himself.

Sakura's face twisted in disgust.

"Ah, I guess Zabuza really was pathetic, to be killed by a group of children and old men." The mole man said, voice high and reedy.

"You must be Gatou." Hatake said, his voice was flat and unimpressed. His body language firm with the promise of power. The idiot did not take notice of the threat.

"I planned to do this from the beginning." The mole man bragged, voice oozing with greasy satisfaction. "I never planned on paying them any money."

"Sensei." Sakura said, voice whisper soft. Hatake tilted his head slightly to indicate he was listening. "I could kill the mole man safely." She was already threading her chakra across the bridge as she coated a palmed kunai.

"I have the ninja's battle each other and once they're weakened I kill them off with numbers!" He laughed. "It doesn't cost me anything! A good plan, don't you think?"

"But it would leave me with very little chakra left." She finished, ignoring the jeering crowd across from her. Her chakra was completely coating the tiny mobster, something that would set off red

alerts to a shinobi but would feel like little more than a mild tickling sensation to a civilian. Hatake's head tilted further in contemplation.

"YOU BASTARD!!" The Uzumaki screamed from behind them, all righteous fury and anger.

"Alright." Hatake said and Sakura reaffirmed her grip on her sword. "You cut off the head, I'm sure I'll be able to scare off the horde."

She tossed the coated kunai into the air and waited for it to reach the very top of its curve before catching on the coating around the mole man. She saw a flash of the thugs before her before her chakra was catching on the kunai and she was falling, a shrieking munchkin beneath her. It was simple enough to position her feet to force the man face first into the concrete, to use the momentum from her fall to drive her chokutō into his heart.

"Vive la révolution." She murmured into the greasy mop of hair.

The munchkin fell silent, bright red blood spreading out beneath the corpse. Sakura didn't find herself smiling. She hadn't enjoyed it. For the first time in her lives as she killed she was bored.

She exhaled softly through her nose and made a mental note that without a challenge, killing might as well be as exciting as cutting up meat for lunch.

"Great job, Pinky." Kakashi said, a gore covered hand ruffling her blood splattered hair. "Go and relax."

Sakura nodded, a burning mix of pride and disappointment in her stomach, and headed to sit next to the slowly waking Uchiha. The Uzumaki was pale with tears in his eyes, but the small smile he sent her looked mostly genuine. She nodded back, practiced fingers pulling out a rag and working on cleaning the blood from her blade.

Sakura's world shrunk to simple movements. She trusted her team to deal with the thugs.

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"Hey, Hey! Our cute little kohai is back!" Hagane said, leaning out of the gate guard window and completely ignoring where Hatake was holding out a hand for their check-in papers.

"Hi Kotestu-senpai, Izumo-senpai!" Sakura said, her voice cheery and

a brilliant smile on her face. Her pastel qipao was freshly washed and there were no traces of blood in her soft, pink hair.

“Did everything go alright?” Asked Kamikuzi, eyes trained on where the Uzumaki was screaming after the Uchiha, the black-haired boy ignoring him with a smug smirk on his face.

“It went great. The sign-in papers please?” Hatake drawled, his tone deadpan. The three ignored him.

“It was really scary!” Sakura said, her eyes wide and Hagane cooed down at her. “There was this evil mob boss trying to rule the country and he sent a missing-nin with this giant sword after us! He was called the demon of the-the... what was it Kakashi-sensei?”

“Momochi Zabuza, the demon of the hidden mist.” He deadpanned and the pair of chūnin blanched at the name but Sakura ignored it and barrelled on, making sure to add as much childish awe to her words as possible.

“Yeah! And he fought sensei and there were giant water dragons and everything, but Kakashi-sensei kicked his ass.” Sakura said, now being pat down and checked for injuries by the pair who had climbed fully out of the window. Hatake was leaning over it behind them, one hand filling in a procured check-in sheet and the other stuffed lazily in his pocket.

“You’re alright Sakura-chan? You didn’t get hurt?” Kamikuzi said and Sakura shook her head.

“Nope!” She smiled angelically. “I didn’t get hurt at all, but we totally started a revolution, overthrew the mob boss and saved the country!” Hatake had now just started walking into the village, ignoring the scene entirely and happily leaving her behind. The Uzumaki and Uchiha followed as they ran in circles around him, now competing against each other to run up various trees and the sides of buildings. Sakura pulled away from the pair of chūnin. “I have to go, thank you senpais!” She waved at them as she left.

“Come see us anytime, little kohai!” Hagane called, waving as he was dragged back into the guard station by Kamikuzi. Sakura laughed, the sound high and musical.

“I’ll bring cookies!” She promised before racing to catch back up to Hatake.

“You do realise that they’ll have told the entire village within an hour.” Hatake drawled, his lone eye roaming the surroundings warily, like he was expecting a green-clad natural disaster to appear on the horizon any second.

“And of course the story they tell will be wildly inaccurate, leading to more and more fanciful rumours and mass speculation over what actually happened. The shinobi of Konoha, being the nosiest creatures in existence, will be compelled to speak to one of our team to determine the original story. Everyone hates Naruto so they won’t go to him, Sasuke’s Sasuke and you’re well known for fucking with people for the fun of it.” She placed a hand over her heart and fluttered her eyelashes dramatically as she spoke. “I, however, actually have a *good* reputation as a *delightful* member of society, the kind of adorable little girl who helps little old ladies carry their groceries home and happily stays for tea to chat about their many grandchildren.” Sakura had a skip in her step as she walked. “I’ve just become a highly valuable commodity.” Hatake sighed.

“Just don’t burn down the village anywhere I’d have to deal with it.” He ordered weakly, tone resigned.

“Of course not, Kakashi-sensei!” She laughed before turning to draw the Uzumaki into a conversation. “Hey Naruto, do you think Iruka-sensei will be at hokage tower?”

Predictably, the blonde lit up and immediately looped the conversation into talking about ramen.

Uzumaki had dropped his crush on her almost entirely after seeing her murder a kid, which ironically had made him much more pleasant to talk to.

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The next morning Sakura awoke to a tapping on her window. She glared out at the ridiculous man perched against the outside wall of her house before- reluctantly- opening it.

“What the fuck, sensei.” She said, her tone deadpan. He handed her a piece of paper.

“Put some chakra into it.”

The paper wrinkled violently and dripped water. Hatake nodded before rummaging through his pockets and withdrawing three scrolls,

which she took.

“You’re still going to be late for training today, aren’t you?” She accused. He ignored her.

“Don’t tell the boys about this, they’re not ready yet.” The asshole promptly disappeared.

Sakura sighed, shut her window, and opened the scrolls. Two she recognised as techniques from the fight with Zabuzza, whilst the other was a more generic guide on channeling lightning releases into weapons.

Ingratiating Herself with the Weirdos (Read: Jōnin)

Chapter Summary

The shinobi contingency of Konoha really has no idea how to handle a young girl that's learnt to weaponise tears, but Shiranui proves to be a fast learner.

It took a day and a half for a shinobi to approach her after Wave. Frankly, she'd expected someone would yesterday. There'd been interest in her, groups of chūnin would glance over at her as they whispered and she got the occasional strange look from a passing in-the-know civilian, but not one had decided to simply *ask*.

Either she'd overestimated her own positive reputation, though considering she'd been stopped to talk by thirteen separate civilians on the walk home from the Hokage tower after she'd handed in her mission report and received no less than six various goody bags, she doubted this was the case. She'd underestimated how insular the shinobi of Konoha were, but *really*, a blind man could tell she would be 'happy' to answer any questions. Or, she'd underestimated how big of a threat Hatake was to them.

She wondered if he'd been secretly threatening the shinobi population to be respectful to his genin. It seemed like something the man would do and absolutely not ever let them know he was.

Either way, her plans for her time post-Wave were flipped on their head when the chūnin of the village scuttled away from her and it was a tokubetsu jōnin who approached her first. Sakura had planned to ingratiate herself with the weaker members of the community first and slowly work her way up the food chain. Jumping straight into the den of wolves was different, but definitely something she could work with.

"Here, let me carry that for you." Said a gentlemanly voice from next to her, tanned hands taking her (purposefully to try and give people an excuse to interact with her) slightly too heavy for her shopping basket. She smiled gratefully up at the man and made her cheeks flush a little, desperately holding in the smirk of triumph at the sight of Shiranui Genma. Konoha's ultimate resident gossip king.

"Thank you, I really shouldn't have gotten so many oranges but they

just looked so delicious!” She said, babbling a little in a show of nerves. After all, it was normal to be nervous when a random stranger suddenly decided to walk you home and carry your things, no matter how nice they seemed. Shiranui nodded, being careful to remain a comfortable distance away, clearly making an effort to look non-threatening. It might have almost worked if Sakura didn’t have such a good sense for danger and Hatake as a sensei. As it was the lazy slouch just worked to remind her that the shinobi next to her was a member of the Hokage guard platoon. Not just the rotating roster of ANBU that guard the woman, but the select few that are taken when the Hokage has to head into enemy territory. To places where masks weren’t allowed and the stakes were higher than ever. One of the ones who’d worked security down to an art form.

“You looked like you needed the help, and I was already heading in this direction.” Shiranui said casually. “Besides, a young girl like you shouldn’t be walking through the streets alone.” His tone was patronising and Sakura’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m more than capable of taking care of myself, shinobi-san.” She said, puffing up in offence and tilting her head to show off her hitai-ate, tapping the metal with a fingernail.

“Ah, you’re right, my apologise.” He said with a sheepish expression. “I’m Shiranui Genma.” He shifted the basket until he was holding it in one arm and offered a hand to shake.

“Haruno Sakura.” She replied, return the handshake and smiling naively up at him.

“Are you a genin?” He asked, as if he hadn’t probably dug up her personal file before approaching her.

“Yep! I graduated a little over a month ago now.”

“Congratulations, who’s your jōnin-sensei? I might know them, make sure they’re not working you too hard.”

“Hatake Kakashi.” She answered and pouted. “Though I’d rather you didn’t, every time one of us tries to complain about the workload he pretends not to hear and then makes us run laps until we pass out.”

“Mmh, Kakashi has a bit of a reputation.” Shiranui nodded sagely. “Were you guys the genin team that went on a c-rank recently?”

“That’s a very general question, Genma-senpai. Genin teams go on c-

ranks all the time.” Sakura replied, mimicking his nodding, Shiranui’s eyes sharpened.

“Ah, well I’d heard that Kakashi’s team’d returned from one a few days ago, or was that wrong?”

“We didn’t return from a c-rank mission, no.”

“So the rumours aren’t true?” Genma asked, brows in his hairline.

Sakura eyes widened and her brow furrowed. “Rumours?”

“There’s a whole bunch of ridiculous stories about your team battling a demon and overthrowing a country floating around.” Shiranui chuckled. “They’ve sparked a betting circle in the jōnin lounge.”

Sakura focused on a trick she’d learnt from one of the jōnin-level scrolls Hatake’d illegally procured for her, cycling her chakra in a small loop behind her eyes and causing them to itch uncomfortably and her tear ducts to activate. With great effort she ignored the feeling, instead focusing the full force of her glittery, teary green eyes up at the tokubetsu jōnin and trembling her lower lip ever so slightly.

“So you’re only talking to me to win a bet?” She said, voice barely above a whisper. Shiranui visibly began to panic. She sniffled. He freaked.

“Not at all, Sakura-chan, I mean maybe a little but Raidō was so insistent that Kakashi had actually died and been resurrected by a cult the worships a demon god, but that’s just insane even for his luck, and I had to prove it wasn’t true and well I couldn’t ask Kakashi he would just give some bullshit about being lost on the-”

His jaw abruptly clicked shut.

She couldn’t help it. She’d started laughing. This wasn’t the plan at all, but the man looked entirely ridiculous. All wide eyed and pale faced and horrified with the manically flapping senbon and hands hovering as though unsure what to do with them.

Were all shinobi this socially incompetent? Or was it just the ones she was lucky enough to interact with?

“Sorry, senpai. I was going to try and blackmail you into owing me a favour but I didn’t expect you to completely freak out like that.” Sakura chuckled as she slipped the key into the lock of her house. Her

smile was full of mirth as she looked back at the dumbstruck looking jōnin. “Shiranui Genma, on the Hokage Guard Platoon and panics at the first sign of tears from a little girl.” She snorted. “Wait here a minute.” She opened the door and waved a hand in his general direction before slipping her shoes off and heading inside. When she returned he was looking at the open door with open confusion. The senbon was hanging, completely still and threatening to fall out of his open mouth.

She took back her shopping basket- the shinobi giving no resistance to the motion- and placed a brown paper bag in the newly empty hand. She pulled on the most earnest looking, angelic smile she could muster and wrapped her hand around the inside doorknob.

“Thank you for the help, senpai!” She said before promptly slamming the door in the man’s face.

She hummed as she went over her plans for dinner.

(Her parents were out of the village on a second honeymoon, so she didn’t feel bad about unsuccessfully trying to recreate food from her life as Tristan)

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The next afternoon as she walked home from team training (Hatake had stopped with the D-ranks and started actually training them after Wave), every muscle burning from exertion and her mind firmly fixated on her next meal, she barely noticed the faces of the group of shinobi walking the opposite direction until one of them stopped suddenly and appeared next to her.

“Hey! Pinky, explain yourself!” Shiranui demanded, arms crossed and senbon flapping with agitation.

“Good afternoon, Genma-senpai. I’m afraid I’m not quite sure what you mean.” She replied serenely and one of his eyebrows twitched in agitation.

“What was with the cookies?!” He said and she made her eyes grow watery again, causing the man to visibly pale in response.

“Did you not like them? I made them myself.” Her bottom lip quivered. The other members of the group chose that moment to catch up to them.

“What are you doing?” Said Namiashi Raidō, levelling an unimpressed look at the brunette.

The senbon increased the pace of its flapping as Shiranui ignored his friends and levelled a finger in her face. “You know very well what I meant.” His voice was hard. Sakura’s eyes overflowed and tears dripped down her cheeks, a hand raised to shakily rub the liquid away as she talked.

“I ju-just wanted to th-th-thank you.” She stuttered between small hitches in her breathing. A hand landed on top of her head. She looked up to see Tatami Iwashi glaring back at Shiranui who was looking increasingly manic. Namiashi cuffed him over the back of his head.

“Really Genma! Bullying genin in broad daylight!” He was scolding even as Shiranui ignored him to watch the smile spreading over Sakura’s face with a strange mix of horror, awe and deep concern. “You’re a fully grown man picking on a little girl, how could you?!”

“Yes Genma-senpai, how could you?” Sakura chuckled, watching as the other two shinobi nodded along with the words before pausing and looking down at her. “I mean really,” She continued, her face full of mirth and her eyes dry. “How could such *upstanding* examples of Konoha Shinobi live with themselves, harassing little girls in the streets?” All three of them were eyeing her with wariness now, Tatami slowly raised his hand off her head as though afraid she would bite him if spooked. “I wonder what Kakashi-sensei would do if he found out what Shiranui Genma, Tatami Iwashi and Namiashi Raidō were doing to his adorable little genin.” Her tone was matter of fact, her smile guileless.

The two newcomers blanched, Shiranui- showing that he could learn, despite evidence otherwise, simply narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms.

“What do you want?” He asked. As if on cue her stomach rumbled.

“Lunch?”

And that was how Sakura ended up in a booth in her favourite barbecue place across from three fully trained, highly deadly assassins after blackmailing them into paying for her. Despite the fact that each bench was only made to fit two, they had all refused to sit next to her, instead squeezing themselves into the opposite bench seat uncomfortably, half in each other’s laps and threatening to spill out

onto the floor.

Sakura smiled, settled into the very middle of her own bench, and begun taking her picks of the freshly cooked food.

“But why the cookies?” Shiranui asked, apparently unable to handle the silence any longer. Sakura blinked up at him and raised an eyebrow.

“It was only polite. You *did* carry my shopping home for me.”

“As a ploy to interrogate you for information.” He countered and she shrugged, chewing on a piece of pork.

“Well yeah, but it’s not like I was the innocent little girl you thought you were targeting.” She said. “I was also attempting to extort you.”

“But you *are* a young girl, aren’t you?” He asked, looking genuinely unsure. She chuckled.

“I am thirteen, I am female, and my hair is naturally this colour of pink.”

“What are you two even talking about?” Namiashi interrupted, a bewildered expression on his face.

“Didn’t you hear, senpai? Apparently on our last mission Kakashi-sensei died and was resurrected by a demon worshipping cult.”

“I was right?” The scarred man looked victorious for a second until Sakura snorted.

“Not even close.” She said, the man wilted and Shiranui chuckled.

“Then what actually did happen?” Asked Tatami.

She hummed, blowing on a mushroom and waving her chopsticks idly. “How badly do you want to know?”

“Four meals at a restaurant of your choice.” Offered Shiranui. She took a bite and raised her chin defiantly.

“Make it eight and I want to spar for an hour with all three of you before hand.” She said. The other two spluttered.

“Five.”

“Six.”

“Done.” Agreed the tokuetsu and they reached over the table in unison, sealing the deal with a single, decisive hand shake. There’s an excited gleam in the man’s eyes that Sakura was positive was reflected in her own.

Tatami put his head in his hands and groaned.

“You can’t just volunteer us for stuff, Genma.” Said Namiashi.

“Of course I can.” Replied Shiranui, clapping a hand on the other man’s shoulder without looking at him. “Now spill, Pinky.” Sakura’s smile was all teeth. This felt like the start of a beautiful friendship.

“Okay, so our client was this old drunk...”

I WILL DEFEND MY SENSEI!

Chapter Summary

Sakura wasn't usually the competitive one on her team, but something about this particular group of weirdos looking down on her sensei really got her blood boiling.

Oh, and Ibiki Morino exists.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sakura watched the small child being shaken around by the black clad Suna-nin with an unimpressed expression.

“Basically, I hate midgets.” The guy said. “Especially younger ones that are rude. Makes me want to kill them.”

The Uzumaki was screaming at him and she wondered if she should get involved, but for all the kid's bluster he didn't actually seem like a killer. He was definitely capable of it, and probably wouldn't get too cut up about it, but he didn't have any of the bloodlust that would lead to murdering random children in the street. At the most he'd probably just bruise the kid.

It might even do the brat some good.

But then the Uchiha decided to interfere; proving that he'd only faked going home and instead chose to sit in a tree and brood like the angsty preteen that he was.

“What are you bastards doing in our village?” The Uchiha growled and Sakura felt her lips twitch despite herself. He was like a troll under a bridge.

“Ah... another guy who pisses me off.”

“Get lost!” Uchiha spat, causing the black clad boy to puff up in offence.

“I hate show-offs like you the most!” He yelled, pulling the strangely shaped bundle off his back and catching Sakura's interest. The bandaged wrapped thing looked suspiciously human-shaped.

Was he a puppeteer? She would actually be keen to watch that fight.

Then the voice came.

“Kankuro, stop it.” It dripped like acid in the ears, a chakra signature appearing behind the Uchiha that burned and blistered like the desert heat. “You’re an embarrassment to our village.”

The Suna kids visibly froze, poorly concealed panic on their features as they unconsciously took a step back from the small form on the tree.

“Losing control of yourself in a fight, how pathetic. Why do you think we came to the leaf village?”

“Listen Gaara, they started it and-”

“Shut up.” The redhead said, voice as cold and humourless as ice. “I’ll kill you.”

He wasn’t bluffing. The black-clad kid might not be the type to murder random children in the street, but the redhead was.

“It looks like we got here early but we didn’t come here to play around.” He said, appearing between them in a swirl of sand. “Let’s go.”

There was a monster in the village. Sakura’s blood pounded and her breathing quickened. A vicious smile tried to stretch her lips, but she forced it down.

“Hold on.” She said, her calm voice cutting through the street. “You’re foreign shinobi in the village, one of whom just attempted to kill the honourable Hokage’s grandson.” The black clad figure shifted nervously. “I’m afraid I have to ask your purpose for being in the village and see your permits.”

“Talk about clueless, don’t you know anything?” The blonde said, a hand on her hip as she displayed the permit. Sakura walked closer and memorised the disappointedly little information on the small card. “We’re genin from the hidden sand. We’ve come to your village to take the chūnin selection exam.”

Sakura ignored the bait- filing away the information that the chūnin exams were coming up- and turned to the other two. “And your permits?” She asked, the redhead glared at her before withdrawing his

own card, she greedily absorbed the information. The black clad figure scoffed at her.

“As if.” He spat, looking down his nose like he was looking at something particularly disgusting.

“YOU BASTARD, DON’T LOOK DOWN ON SAKURA-CHAN!” Uzumaki (un)helpfully added and the man with the painted face sneered. Thankfully the redhead intervened before it could escalate again.

“Kankuro.” He said, voice barely above a whisper and the black clad figure scowled but complied, holding out his own shiny card.

“Thank you for your compliance.” Sakura said, a brilliant smile on her face. “I’ll look forward to watching you in the finals, I’ve always wanted to see a competent puppeteer fight.”

“Th-thank you.” Kankuro stammered, his cheeks visibly flushing under the face paint, confirming that he was in fact a puppeteer. The redhead scoffed, turned and left.

Sakura hummed, watching the retreating backs of the figures.

“What did you find out?” The Uchiha asked, showing actual intelligence instead of angst for once. Sakura turned to see the honourable grandson and the Uzumaki already in another fight.

“Sabako no Gaara, Sabako no Temari and Sabako no Kankuro.” She said and he raised a jet black eyebrow. “Suna has a slightly different naming system, they don’t have family names, but titles. Sabako means they’re the children of the Kazekage. They’ve likely been trained by Suna’s best from childhood.” She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. “Kankuro is a puppeteer, a discipline that takes decades to truly master, so he’d likely be a fairly easy fight as young as he is. Temari was carrying a war fan, a powerful weapon but one she likely doesn’t have yet the chakra reserves to use for extended periods, she’d be a hard fight but a straightforward one won through attrition.”

“And Gaara?” The Uchiha said, impatience colouring his tone. He’d likely already dismissed the other two, then, and was hence happy to completely ignore them, thinking himself above even knowing about them.

“Gaara would likely break every bone in your body and laugh as he did it.” She said and he scowled. “My advice for fighting him? Don’t.”

“Tch.” He spat and left without another word.

Sakura didn’t miss the way his hands clenched, however. She didn’t worry. They weren’t ready to take the exams yet, anyway.

-

“I know this is sudden but I’ve nominated you for the chūnin exams.” Hatake said. “Here are your applications.”

Sakura stared incredulously at the slips, not noticing as two were taken and it was just the one before her. She didn’t understand.

They weren’t ready for the exams. Why would he nominate them?

“Sakura-chan?” Hatake said, the slip of paper being waved in front of her face. She absentmindedly took it and frowned.

Was it political? But that didn’t seem quite right, the Hokage had a massive soft spot for the Uzumaki. He would be more likely to stab someone for suggesting that he risk the kid’s life for political purposes than put pressure on Hatake to enter them for the sake of a strong showing.

“Sakura-chan?” Hatake asked, a finger poking the crease between her eyebrows.

Was it for training purposes? But if Hatake wanted to promote their teamwork or something else it would be far more efficient to simply dump them in the wilderness for a couple of weeks.

“Pinky?” He said, a hand landing on top of her head and moving it slowly from side to side.

Bragging rights maybe? Were the other jōnin pressuring him?

“No.” She gasped, green eyes locking onto Hatake’s stupid eye smile. “Just to beat Gai? *Really?*”

Hatake sniffed, a gloved hand coming up to rest over his heart and an exaggeratedly wounded expression on his sliver of face. “I would never!”

She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Fine.” He ruffled her hair and turned back to the other two- very confused looking-teammates.

“This is just a nomination. Whether or not to take the exam is up to each of you. Those who wish to take it should sign those papers and turn them in at room 301 by 4PM tomorrow. That is all.” And then the asshole just disappeared.

“You guys want to come to mine to prepare?” She asked.

“No.” The Uchiha scoffed. “Don’t get in my way, losers.” He walked away.

“HEY DON’T BE AN ASSHOLE TEME!” The Uzumaki screamed, chasing after the raven-haired boy and leaving her alone on the bridge.

The exams were going to end badly.

(But if she was going to have to compete in them anyway, she might as well put her all into it.)

-

The group of genin surrounding the wooden doors seemed to part before the Uchiha. Probably the one good thing about his personality was that it made him great at naturally commanding attention.

Baby-Hagane winked at her whilst Baby-Kamizuki made a gesture for her to stay silent. She waved subtly and smiled before pretending not to know them.

“You will let me pass through and also remove the surrounding genjutsu.” Uchiha said, showcasing one of the worst parts about his personality. His need to show off rather than quietly let the idiots fail. “Sakura, you must have noticed it first right? Your analytical ability is the best on the team.”

“Of course. This is the second floor.” She replied, an easygoing smile on her face. Internally she was freaking out. Was the Uchiha actually trying to demonstrate the abilities of the entire team? Did he have a passing thought that was about something other than himself? Or was this a my-team-*must-be-great-I’m-on-it* situation?

“Yup.” The Uzumaki agreed.

“Not bad, but all you did was see through it!” The baby-Hagane said, punctuating his sentence with a kick. Uchiha responded, only for both to be blocked by a sea of fluorescent green.

Sakura's eyes narrowed. She hadn't seen team Gai in person before, not wanting to risk her tentative blackmail position with Hatake, but that spandex was *very* distinctive.

"What happened to the plan?" Said a Hyuuga, undoubtedly the supposed prodigy. He definitely looked like a clan prodigy, with the amount of angst the kid radiated. "You're the one who said we shouldn't draw attention to ourselves."

"Well..." The mini green beast locked eyes with her and she felt a sinking feeling appear in her gut.

"Oh no." Groaned the kunoichi of the group, a sentiment she very much agreed with.

"Hi!" The green nightmare said. "My name is Rock Lee, so yours is Sakura."

"Haruno Sakura, pleased to meet you Lee-san." She said, holding a hand out and smiling. He ignored her hand to give a hearty thumbs up instead, winking and teeth sparkling.

"Let's go out together! I'll protect you until I die!!!"

"I'm flattered, Lee-san." Sakura started and he wilted. "But I'm afraid I'm not looking for a relationship at the moment. You three are team Gai, right?" She deflected and they looked surprised.

"Has Kakashi been talking about us?" The weapons mistress asked and Sakura chuckled.

"Not at all, I just do my research." She said. Feeling emboldened by the general competitive atmosphere of the exams and strangely protective of Hatake in the face of weirdos, she crossed her arms and tilted her chin cockily. "I guess that makes our teams eternal rivals? We'll look forward to beating you three into the dirt."

In a rare showing of teamwork- likely only happening because the boys couldn't back down from a challenge- Sasuke stepped smoothly into position at the front, placing Sakura on his left flank. Naruto stepped into his own on the right. They moved in synch, away from the trio and towards the third level. Sakura listed off facts just loud enough for them both to hear as they went.

"Maito Gai has been Kakashi-sensei's rival since they were in the academy, they're Gai's genin team."

“So we destroy them.” The Uchiha said, nodding once, and Sakura smirked despite herself.

“Yes! Believe it!” Uzumaki cried.

“Gai is a taijutsu expert, so expect all three to be strong hand-to-hand. Lee is Gai’s protégée, specialising in purely taijutsu. Keep him at a distance whenever possible. Hyuuga Neji is a clan prodigy, expect him to be strong in his clan techniques but largely unadaptable and with a host of mental hangups. Create chaos. Tenten is a weapons mistress and the weakest of the group, but would be highly effective as long range support and likely to be carrying a million different weapons at any given moment.” She hummed. “In a team fight, Sasuke take Lee, Naruto take Neji, I’ll take Tenten.” The other two nodded.

“And individually?” Uchiha asked.

“Hmm, I think we could all take them if we were smart about it, but me and Naruto would struggle the most with Lee, Sasuke you would struggle the most with Neji.”

“HAHA! We’ll beat them, believe it!” Uzumaki cried, bounding ahead with his hands behind his head.

“Hey, guy with the dark eyes.” Said Lee, appearing from above them. “Will you fight me right here?”

“A fight right now?” The Uchiha replied.

“My name is Rock Lee.” Lee settled into a relaxed stance. “Uchiha Sasuke. I wish to test my techniques against the Uchiha clan.”

“Challenging me with the Uchiha name.” Uchiha begun, his voice having gone into full angst mode. Sakura sighed, knowing he had heard the mention of his family name and let his logic fly out the window, almost definitely forgetting everything she’d said about the green genin in favour of trying to punch him in the face. “You’re about to learn what this name means, thick brows.”

Sakura eyed the Uzumaki. He was getting increasingly red faced and angry, now outright glaring at the Uchiha. They must have hit their teamwork quota for the day.

“Please-” Lee started.

“WAIT!” Uzumaki interrupted. “I’ll take care of thick brows. Just give

me five minutes.”

“Who I wished to fight is not you, it’s Uchiha.” Lee said, effectively cutting through Uzumaki’s remaining sanity and ensuring he *definitely* forgot everything she had said.

“DAMMIT I’M SICK OF HEARING ABOUT SASUKE!!!” He screamed and immediately charged in, easily getting flipped by the taijutsu specialist.

“I’ll say this. You guys cannot defeat me, because right now you are not the strongest leaf genin.”

“Sounds fun, I’ll do it.” Uchiha replied, mimicking the Uzumaki- though he would probably try to kill her if she pointed that out- and immediately charging in. Sakura stepped back to lean against a wall and prayed for patience. She was a little curious to see the Uchiha using the Sharingan without telling anyone on the team he could, but she supposed she wasn’t actually surprised.

Maybe if he’d shared that he’d unlocked his doujutsu she would have shared that Lee would be able to counter it. Oh well. Maybe it would be good for the arrogant preteen.

Sakura eyed the very unsurprised look on the Uzumaki’s face despite the surprise doujutsu use and made a mental note that she couldn’t even trust the babblerer to inform her of basic team information.

A turtle appeared.

A man appeared on the turtle.

Suddenly, Sakura understood why Hatake was so terrified of the genin teams meeting. Maito Gai was *a lot*. His spandex was eye burningly green. His hair unbelievably shiny. His teeth blindingly white. His eyebrows absurdly thick. She walked over to join the other two, feeling the unfamiliar need to commiserate with human company as she watched Maito and mini-Maito sob over each other.

He looked over at them. She unconsciously shifted away.

“Hey you guys, how’s Kakashi-sensei doing?”

“Kakashi?” Uchiha asked, incredulous with conversation whiplash. The green monstrosity simply disappeared, something that was Very Strange considering that Sakura hadn’t been able to take her eyes off

it.

“People refer to us as eternal rivals.” A voice behind them said and she whipped around. “50 wins, 49 losses. I’m stronger than Kakashi.” His grin was blinding. His voice was smug.

Sakura’s eyes narrowed, her blood boiled. “So we’ll be the tie between you two.” She growled, cracking a fist as she talked and let a slow smile stretch over her face. “When we destroy your genin.”

“YOSH!” The man screamed, throwing himself into a pose. Sakura just barely resisted the need to flinch away. “WHAT YOUTHFULNESS!!! You guys should head to the classroom!” He said before he disappeared.

A brow twitched with annoyance. She stalked towards the classroom, ignoring whatever spat the boys had that delayed them following by a few minutes. She glared at the man standing lazily before the doors.

“Ah, Sakura-chan, was that a particularly loud bout of youthfulness I heard?” Hatake drawled.

“For the record, I am annoyed that we are being used to settle a petty competition between weirdos.” Sakura said, her tone scathing as she radiated killing intent. Hatake looked rightfully nervous. “But for some, inexplicable, reason I find myself more annoyed at the insinuation that you are lesser and hence we are lesser to that insane man and his genin team. I will make sure we win this battle.” Her smile was feral and her body oozed bloodlust.

“Aah.” Hatake nodded. “It’s good to see you motivated.” His tone was bland, but his eye crinkled with fondness at the corner. The boys appeared and stood next to her warily. “It’s good to see you all here, the test can only be taken in teams of three so if one of you had decided not to take it the test would have ended here.”

“But you said taking the test was an individual choice? You lied to us?!” Uzumaki asked, as if the man hadn’t been lying to them from the moment they met.

“I didn’t think any of you would say no, but I wanted you to all make the choice yourselves, without pressure from the others to take the exam. But you all came of your own free will; you guys are my proud team.” He smiled. “NOW GO!!”

“YEAH LETS GO!!” Cried Uzumaki and they stepped through the

doors.

The sea of genin were a surprise. Sakura knew intellectually that a lot of people took the chūnin exams every year, she had seen the very few publicly available statistics, but knowing it and seeing it were two different things. The room pulsed with chakra and killing intent. The air seemed to tingle with the amount of agitated power in one room until she felt like her very bones were singing with it.

The corners of her lips quirked.

“SASUKE-KUN!” A blonde blur yelled before attaching herself to the Uchiha. “I haven’t seen you for a while so I’ve been waiting in excitement.”

“Shouldn’t a Yamanaka know better than to throw themselves suddenly onto a shinobi?” Sakura said, tone flat.

“Why if it isn’t Sakura. Big ugly forehead as always.” The Yamanaka sneered, ignoring what was actually said entirely in favour of petty insults. Sakura raised an eyebrow in the Uchiha’s direction and he scowled, but made no effort to actually throw the girl off.

Chauvinism, resignation or actually returning her affections? Sakura couldn’t tell.

“You guys are taking this stupid test too? Don’t die.” Nara said, appearing behind the blonde with the Akimichi.

“Oh! The idiot trio!” Uzumaki said, apparently entirely sincerely believing that, despite the Nara being an actual genius, if lazy.

“You’re concern is touching, Shikamaru.” Sakura monotoned. The Nara wouldn’t fall for any act of sincerity no matter what she did anyway. As expected, he grimaced at her and leant his weight away, as if afraid her psychopathy was catching.

“I’m sure *you’re* well aware of the exam mortality rates.” He replied and she smiled not-so-nicely.

“Of course, these facts just seem to find me whenever I enter a library.” She tilted her head and looked over the three teams. “Why did your sensei nominate you?” He huffed with annoyance.

“He made a bet with yours, and apparently I’m ‘chūnin material’.”

“And Yūhi followed Sarutobi’s lead.” She nodded.

“Why did Hatake engineer this?”

“You haven’t figured it out?” Her voice was filled with mirth and he glared. “Maito Gai, his eternal rival, has entered a team.”

“And he doesn’t want the attention being the only sensei to enter rookie genin would bring.” He finished. “Troublesome.”

“You guys are rookies just out of the academy right? Screaming like little girls, geez.” A soft voice said, a silver haired teen approaching the group.

Every possible hackle was raised. Sakura had spent two lifetimes pretending to be human. She could *tell* when someone was like her. It was instinct. A mental sign that says ‘this person is a shell desperate to be filled with blood’. She forced herself not to react.

Willed herself neutral.

She didn’t know if the boy could see her, too.

“This isn’t a picnic.” The boy said, thankfully not even glancing in her direction. If anything, the teen seemed inordinately focused on the Uchiha.

“And who are you?!” Uzumaki slurred.

“I’m Kabuto. But instead of that, look behind you.”

Sakura did not want to turn her back on the teen. Every instinct in her body willed herself to not turn her back on the teen. But she had to.

She couldn’t draw attention to herself and to everyone else he was just a mild-mannered, slightly annoyed fellow Konoha genin. A friend. *Trustworthy*.

She turned her back on the teen. Her nerves were set on edge. She couldn’t put the sounds coming out of people’s mouths together into words beyond the crawling up her spine, but she forced herself to copy the expressions around her, she forced herself to memorise *every detail* for reevaluation later. It wasn’t until he crouched, putting his own back to her that she relaxed enough to concentrate again.

Nara sent her a quizzical look. She double checked the teen couldn’t see and discreetly signed ‘danger/enemy’. Thankfully, he caught on

quick and pretended nothing had happened. Sakura forced herself to focus on the conversation that was happening and felt her surprise rise with the cards the teen was showing.

Was he really stupid enough to think he could get away with that? The information on his chakra cards was *well* above anything available to a genin. Unless the kid had a sensei with Hatake's disregard for rules, a ridiculously high clearance level and ability to break into and out of the safest places in Konoha and every other hidden village- the chance was negligible, if it even existed at all- then he was outright lying about his identity.

Sakura looked at her fellow genin. None of them were suspicious of the cards. The Nara was wary of the teen, but he didn't even bat an eyelash at the very blatantly illegal and full of classified information cards.

She reevaluated just how obvious that fact was and realised that she was probably the only one with the potential to actually realise it. Sakura was the only one there who had spent years in every available library and archive scouring for these kinds of facts. Knowledge about mission histories, basic stats, accurate numbers and statistics for the various villages. That knowledge was *power* and hence shinobi made it really, really hard to get. The Nara was smart enough to understand why it was useful to know that stuff, but too lazy to go out of his way to try- and fail- to find it.

The rest were just young, impressionable kids faced with an older, more experienced authority figure. They wouldn't even second guess the teen.

The important question was why.

Seeing the teen continue to pay the most attention to the Uchiha, she didn't think she'd like the answer.

"MY NAME IS UZUMAKI NARUTO!!! I WON'T LOSE TO YOU BASTARDS!!!" The blonde screamed, fulfilling his need to do something loud and distracting once an hour. "YOU GOT THAT?!! Ah that felt great."

Sakura smiled, every single eye was on him, completely disregarding the harmless looking, pastel girl at his side. She could work with that.

"Hey?! What is he-?!!" Ino cried, for some reason looking to her for the answer.

“You tell ‘em, Naruto.” Sakura encouraged and his grin widened, his stance hardened.

“Heh.” The Uchiha agreed.

-

Morino Ibiki and the rest of the Torture and Interrogation team appeared in a cloud of smoke and a vast wall of killing intent. His scarred, cloak clad form commanded respect and drove a number of the room to quiet whimpering.

Sakura’s vicious smile stayed with her even as she was sat down and looking at her test. She couldn’t help it, the man was one of the closest things she had to a personal hero.

“The first rule. You guys start off with ten points. The test is made up of ten questions. You get a question wrong, you lose a point.

“The second rule. This is a team test. Whether or not you pass will be determined by the combined score of your teammates.

“The third rule. Anyone caught cheating by the testing officers will lose two points for every offence.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Pathetic ones caught cheating will be destroying themselves. As shinobi trying to achieve the level of chūnin, be proud ninjas.

“The final rule. Those that lose all their points during the test and those that don’t answer any questions correctly will be failed along with their two teammates.”

She cracked a knuckle.

“The test will last one hour. BEGIN!”

She lifted her pencil and considered the paper in front of her. There were nine questions, instructions for a mystery tenth at the end. The first rule was pretty straightforward, but the last three were straight psychological warfare. Saying ‘you get two points off for cheating’ was just saying ‘you get five chances to try and cheat’. The fourth rule removed anyone’s safety net, ensuring they couldn’t feel safe with two competent teammates even whilst the second ensured they would feel responsible for their team’s failure.

The test was designed to put them into a position of stress and see how they responded.

Her eyes narrowed on the tenth question. The timed aspect was suspect, but without more information she couldn't rely on it to get her by.

She could answer every question. Uzumaki and Uchiha likely could not. In fact, it was incredibly likely that almost every single genin in the room could not answer a single question.

Uchiha had the Sharingan. He could cheat successfully.

Uzumaki was an idiot. She could either wait for him to freak out and fail to cheat five times, hence failing the exam, or rely on her suspicions about the tenth question.

Her eyes narrowed on his seat. Or, she could lose two points and do the cheating for him.

Of course the Proctors could simply fail her for doing so, they hadn't given any criteria or need to prove the one's failed were cheating, but she felt she could argue her way out of that if it came down to it.

She hummed under her breath and finished filling out the test. She glanced at the clock. Fifteen minutes had passed. Naruto was shaking but he hadn't yet done much else. She wrote 'A present -from Sakura' on the top of the page and coated both hers and the Uzumaki's papers in her chakra.

It was something she'd learned to do whilst reading up about puppetry. The technique was almost identical to her kawarimi, she just had to feed far more chakra into it. It was extremely obvious that it was being used, but Sakura wasn't going for stealth in this situation.

With a serene smile and a twitch of her fingers her paper went flying through the air. It reached Naruto's desk and slid neatly into position in front of him whilst his own slid away, flying through the air and deftly landing in front of her. Naruto jumped, visibly prepared himself to shriek, before reading the message on the top and dramatically collapsing on the desk in relief. No one called her number to fail her.

Morino was either glaring at her or trying very hard not to laugh. She took it as the latter and smiled sweetly at the man, before reproducing her answers onto the second test. She considered it for a second, flipped the paper, and stuck it to the desk with her chakra.

When she regained her concentration a few minutes later, angry gouges having appeared in the wood at the edges of her paper, she figured that was for the best. She could feel the Yamanaka's glare on the back of her head.

Thirty minutes passed. With nothing else to do she recreated the memorised information cards, adding a transcript of the conversation with the teen at the bottom and a quick profile sketch.

Underneath it she simply wrote, 'As someone who's scoured every possible legal source for this information, I can attest to the fact that it's completely impossible for a Konoha Genin to amass this kind of thing. And he hid it well, but he was also extremely creepy and unnaturally focused on Uchiha Sasuke.'

She unstuck her paper and flipped it back over just in time for the tenth question to begin. Hopefully, at least one of the Torture and Interrogation professionals would notice the information and pass it on to the relevant people. Just to be sure she included a request to read the back of the test on the front.

"And now, we will begin the tenth question." Ibiki said, somehow managing to make his voice boom whilst talking intimidatingly quietly. "Before we get to it, I'd like to go over the added rules for this question."

The back door opened, the black clad kid and his puppet strolling in.

"Heh, nice timing. Was your doll playing beneficial?" Ibiki taunted. "Just sit down." Sakura's eyes narrowed. The kid wasn't getting failed? Was it because the puppetry was impressive or for the sake of the Drama of the final question?

"I'll now explain, these are the rules of desperation.

"First, you must decide whether or not to take the question. If you choose not to, your points will be deducted to zero. You fail, along with your teammates.

"And now, the other rule. If you chose to take it and answer incorrectly, that person will lose the right to take the chūnin exams again."

"WHAT KIND OF STUPID RULE IS THAT?! THERE ARE GUYS HERE WHO HAVE TAKEN THE EXAM BEFORE!" Yelled Kiba.

Ibiki's entire face darkened. The corners of his mouth turned up. The laughter that filled the room was filled with sheer, sadistic pleasure.

"You guys were unlucky. This year it's my rules. But I am giving you a way out. Those that aren't confident can choose not to take it and try again next year.

"Now let's begin the tenth question."

Sakura's cheeks were hurting. Her eyes were manic. Her smile was feral. A hand did its best cover it.

She'd leant all the way forward in her seat. She just couldn't help it. The guy was a *master*.

He had gotten the entire room of genin hooked on his words, made an entire room piss themselves and turn into obedient dogs. Fortunately for her, her team was trained by Hatake Kakashi. The very first thing he'd taught them was that all rules were bullshit, people in positions of power will lie to you and that *everything* was a logical ruse.

Sakura schooled her face into blankness, leant back in her seat, and enjoyed watching the idiots leave. She considered the first to quit.

Was he a plant? If he was he worked. After that first hand there was a veritable flood of forfeits. More than half the room trickled out.

Then she watched Naruto raise his hand. She tensed. Uzumaki Naruto turning down a challenge? Was he sick?

His hand slammed down and she relaxed. Uzumaki was fine. He just hadn't done anything loud and distracting for an hour.

"I CONGRATULATE YOU ON PASSING THE FIRST TEST!!!"

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to thank you all for the positive reception this fic has been getting! Seriously you guys have no idea how much all the kudos and comments mean to me! THANK YOU!!!

I also wanted to let you all know that there will be a few side works to go along with this fic. I'm currently working on an AU of this AU that splits off in the later chapters and then goes wildly off course of both this fic and cannon. I'm also going to be posting a bunch of drabbles/omake of other character's POVs (this fic will

be 100% Sakura's POV) and some scenes that I couldn't get to fit into this fic no matter how I tried. So yeah, look forward to that if you're interested :)

don't meet your heroes

Chapter Summary

Sakura is beginning to see the disadvantages of having an attention grabbing pariah and Mr My-eyeballs-are-worth-millions on her genin team.

But she does get to kill people.

(At least they're good for bait.)

Sakura watched the trio beneath her, her feet silently moving over the branches.

The forest of death lived up to its name. The very air was dank and oppressive. The trees and the dirt seemed to do their best to trip you up. The animals were monsters more often than not. A result of the first Hokage using the training ground to relieve stress, literally pouring his anger and frustration into the trees he grew, the entire forest was almost sentient with its want to kill.

Sakura loved it.

"I gotta take a piss." Uzumaki proclaimed, wandering off into the bushes. Uchiha and her water clone waited patiently even as the actual Sakura watched him be bound and gagged by an Ame-nin, the genin transforming into the blonde and approaching the Uchiha and clone-Sakura.

His henge work was sloppy. Not only was it wrong but it was bleeding off chakra like a slit throat.

The Uchiha would spot it from a mile away. Sakura dropped silently onto the ground next to the bound Uzumaki. Her henge rippled as the scenery around her changed, the colours shifting from the pale colours of the trunks to the dark greens and browns of the undergrowth. She slashed through the ropes, watched as the Uzumaki nodded to her before running in the direction of the fight, and headed back into the heights.

She would intervene if it looked like they were going to lose, but doing so would give away her existence to any watchers. She trusted the boys to take care of it, even as they dealt with 'protecting' clone-

Sakura.

Privately, she could admit seeing herself being so useless was galling. But for all that the water clone was solid, and hence could deal damage, it only had a tenth of her power and would melt back into water with only a mildly serious injury. She didn't have the chakra to expend on creating an endless lineup of them.

She could create five before resting, any more and her chakra levels would become dangerously low, and maintain a maximum of three at a time before her concentration would slip.

She watched Uchiha stab the Ame-nin, frustratingly- but probably in a good move for the preteen's mental state- missing anything vital, and saw the shinobi's inevitable escape.

Her sword passed cleanly through the genin's neck. Far enough away that it wouldn't be immediately attributed to their genin team, close enough that she could maintain her clone. She caught the body and lowered it silently onto the ground. A quick, but careful, riffling saw her adding to her kunai selection and confirming the shinobi didn't have a scroll.

The ground vibrated with an explosion. Winds buffeted her as she tried to return. The clone melted.

Sakura gritted her teeth and sped through hand signs, reforming the clone from the first one's water and hoping to god the enemy did that hadn't realised she'd disappeared. She landed on a trunk above clone-Sakura and Sasuke, eyes searching desperately for Naruto, despite knowing he wasn't there. Sakura wasn't a sensor by any means, she couldn't follow or track signatures, but she was good at getting a 'taste' for the people immediately around her, some more easily than others. The Uzumaki was *impossible* to miss when he was in the immediate vicinity, his chakra like a bonfire or a small sun. That she couldn't sense him meant he was out of the range she could go from her clone.

She couldn't go after him. She had to trust he'd end up alright alone.

Then fake-Naruto stepped out of the bushes and she felt ice flood her veins. She no longer worried for the real Naruto. The further away he was the safer he would be.

The fake-Naruto was mimicking the blonde's chakra signature and he was mimicking it *well*. She wouldn't have even noticed the difference

if she wasn't so familiar with the technique. The mostly theoretical technique she had been learning from illegally acquired, highly restricted texts.

The theoretical technique that only two shinobi in existence had ever had any success in.

Sakura was the second. She *desperately* didn't want to believe that fake-Naruto was the first.

Thank god for Sasuke and his angst-driven paranoia.

"Impressive that you knew." Fake-Naruto said. Sakura hoped she was imagining the way they hissed the 's' sounds. He disappeared in a swirl of smoke, reappearing as a tall, thin shinobi with extremely long hair. "How did you know? That I was a fake."

"I knew you were listening to our conversation from under the ground. That's why I made the codeword like that." Sasuke replied and Sakura once again mentally thanked his angst-paranoia. "There's no way he could remember something that long, so you had to be a fake."

"I see." The man drawled. "Neither tired nor ill prepared, are we? This will be more fun than I thought."

And Sakura *knew*. Somehow, for some reason, Orochimaru had infiltrated their chūnin exams with the express purpose of getting to Sasuke. It wasn't to kill him. If he wanted to kill him he wouldn't be making a spectacle of it. He would sneak into the boy's house at night, slit his throat and steal his eyes.

Was he trying to *convert* him?!

Sakura knew three things about the situation. The first, was that Orochimaru would be able to kill every person in the arena as easily as batting aside a fly. The second, was that the only person who was even close to safe was Sasuke. The third, was that that did not mean he wouldn't be killed. If the Sannin really was trying to convert the kid then this was very likely some kind of test. If Sasuke failed, he would be killed. If he failed, the Sannin would get annoyed and they would *all* be killed. But if he was interesting? There was a chance the Sannin would leave the rest of them alive out of sheer indifference. Too preoccupied with the honeypot to pay attention to the flies.

"You want my earth scroll, since you guys have the heaven scroll."

Orochimaru drawled before swallowing the black cylinder in the creepiest way possible. Sakura took the chance and her clone stepped closer to Sasuke.

“Sasuke. That is not a genin. He is here to kill us. Do not get distracted or we will die.” Clone-Sakura whispered, its voice only very barely audible. Uchiha tilted his head in acknowledgement.

“Now, let’s begin the battle for each other’s scrolls with our lives on the line.”

Killing intent hit like a break wall. Sakura’s heart hammered in her chest. Her breath quickened. Her hands were steady on the trunk.

A manic smile lit up her face.

“Sakura.” Sasuke panted out, almost entirely debilitated. Clone-Sakura didn’t reply, making a show of being actually entirely debilitated. The more the Sannin underestimated her the better. Sakura slipped through the branches, painstakingly slowly moving to flank him and get lower to the ground. Closer to the potential fight.

“Sasuke-kun are you alri-!” A hand slapped over clone-Sakura’s face. Sasuke was both trying to hide in an open area and preventing the water clone from being any kind of distraction. He was panicking. Badly.

Shit.

Clone-Sakura pushed them both off the tree before the snake could reach them, twisting to land cleanly in the grass. Sasuke was pushed somewhat out of his panic by the fall. Throwing himself away and launching a volley of kunai at the creature. It collapsed and a body rose from out of its flesh.

“You guys shouldn’t relax, even for a moment. Prey should always be trying their best to run away in the presence of a predator.”

Sasuke was frozen as Orochimaru moved. His fear overriding his sense. Sakura gritted her teeth and shifted forward, ready to try and snatch the boy before he was crushed by the man but the familiar feeling of a chakra signature stopped her. A bonfire to her senses and a brilliant figure of orange atop a pale branch of wood.

Sakura felt like she might cry in relief even as she wanted to scream at the idiot to run. If Naruto was here than that meant he wasn’t safe. It

meant he would throw himself incessantly at the Sannin and dramatically increase the possibility he would get annoyed and simply kill them all. But if anyone, *anyone*, could light a fire under Sasuke's ass and make him be interesting enough to stay alive then it would be Uzumaki Naruto.

There was a chance. A very, very, *very* small chance that they would survive this.

"I'm sorry, Sasuke!" Naruto cried. Brilliant and loud and distracting as she dropped to the ground and her colours shifted. "I forgot the codeword!"

"Great job Naruto!" Screamed clone-Sakura.

"Naruto! I know you think you're being really cool and you're here to save us but forget it!" Sasuke screamed and Sakura had to fight the urge to hiss angrily. "Run away! This is on a whole other level!!!"

He was *wrong* and he couldn't *see* and they were going to *die*.

"Looks like you successfully defeated that giant snake Naruto-kun." Hissed Orochimaru.

"HEY HEY! It looks like you were picking on the weak!" Naruto cried, full of his usual righteous indignation when faced with wrong doing.

"I will give you the scroll! Take it and leave, please!" Sasuke yelled. Orochimaru was visibly disappointed in the boy and Sakura had to fight down the urge to punch the coward.

Naruto didn't bother. Sasuke went flying and the blonde clutched the scroll in his hand.

"I forgot the codeword, so I can't test it, but you're Sasuke's fake aren't you?" Naruto asked.

"You total moron! I'm the real Sasuke!"

"Liar." Naruto straightened. "There's no way such a stupid coward like you is the Sasuke I know!! I don't know how strong this guy is but what guarantee is there that he'll even let us go if we give him the scroll? You're the one too freaked out to understand the situation!"

"Naruto-kun" Purred Orochimaru, sending a chill down Sakura's spine. "You are correct! Since I can just kill you and take the scroll!"

He spread blood over what was almost certainly a summoning seal and Sakura braced herself.

The resulting weight of chakra appearing made her stomach roll violently. The monstrous serpent that appeared stretched endlessly into the distance of the destroyed trees like the world eating serpents of legend.

Naruto and Sasuke were screaming. The world was collapsing in around them. And then corrosive chakra was spreading through the debris.

It burned like acid in the air and Sakura felt a smile stretch on her face as it righted the world and she moved. She threw herself upwards through the mess of branches and landed on the neck of the serpent as it lunged towards Sasuke. She coated what she could and she poured lightning as silently as possible down her blade.

She threw herself forward as Naruto darted between a monster and a preteen boy and was lifted by an unnaturally long tongue for his efforts. Sakura didn't think. Didn't plan. Just threw herself between the two, slashed her crackling sword through the line of pink tongue and caught her chakra on the first coating she could. And then she caught her chakra again. And again.

She stopped for breath. Turned back to the scene.

Orochimaru was standing on the edge of the giant head. The stump of his tongue bleeding and hanging from his mouth, though he looked barely even put out by it. Naruto had dropped to ground below, but he wasn't moving. He wasn't dead, his chakra was too bright of a bonfire for that, but he was unconscious.

"There are four of you?" Orochimaru mused, eyes roaming the trees to try and find her. Sakura eased herself down to the forest floor slowly, making her way to the orange form with deliberate slowness. The man's eyes locked onto clone-Sakura and they narrowed.

He blurred, appeared in front of the clone, and picked it up by the chin, moving it from side to side as he examined it.

"You're a clone." He murmured. "But you're imitating your own signature?" He pushed a hand through the clone's chest, causing it to melt into water. "Ingenious! And only a genin!" He looked around and locked eyes with her dappled form next to the fallen boy. She allowed her henge to drop, rippling off her to reveal her blood-splattered

purple clothes. If anything the man's smile only widened. "I didn't sense that at all, and I still can't sense you even though I know you're there."

She checked Naruto wasn't suffering from any broken bones. Thankfully he wasn't, just a nasty bump on the head and what looked like chakra burnout, a condition similar to chakra exhaustion where the body expends a large amount all at once without being used to doing so, overloading its circuits and causing major functions to temporarily shut down. He would likely be out for a long while.

"Thank you." Sakura said, hiking Naruto over a shoulder. "I try not to waste my chakra on inefficacious senjutsu." She replied, referencing one of his more interesting theories on chakra sensing.

The Sannin cackled. "Oh, I am flattered. To think I thought this day wouldn't get any more interesting than the jinchūriki brat."

"Yes, well, you know what they say about meeting your heroes." She muttered before turning and catching sight of the trembling form of the Uchiha. She felt her blood boil at the pathetic sight. "Sasuke!" She yelled, the boy's head whipping her direction. "Naruto is an idiot! He's loud and obnoxious and distracting! But at least he's not a cowardly little boy happy to die shaking on his knees!" She was spitting her words, her voice low and venomous and the boy snarled at her, eyes finally- finally- turning red and the low simmer of determination appearing on his features.

He launched himself at Orochimaru, effectively distracting the man and Sakura threw herself and the body on her shoulder onto a trunk, running to get to a safe as possible location. The Sannin was still just playing with Sasuke, but he seemed excited now. His future pawn was performing adequately. He'd moved on from simply beating them up to breaking down the Uchiha's mental state.

Sakura even let herself hope that she might live.

Orochimaru's neck elongated impossibly. His teeth buried themselves in Sasuke's neck. Orochimaru disappeared.

Sasuke screamed.

She raced across the branches and threw herself towards the boy. His mangled screams of pain ringing through the trees. She smashed her fingers into the pulse point on his neck and he went silent, slumping into the floor below him.

There were three black tomoe on his skin.

Sakura looked through the branches. Night was falling. She pocketed the heaven scroll. Lifted the Uchiha onto her other shoulder and darted through the trees.

She had two choices. Either find somewhere to hunker down for the night, play the long game, and aim to conserve her energy so that they would just survive. Or she could use the last of her chakra, set a trap, and aim to finish this test before daybreak. She considered the bonfire of chakra on one shoulder and the attention grabbing pariah on the other.

Trap it was.

-

There were piteous children in the bushes. She could see them, sitting at the edge of the clearing and peeking through the trees. They smelt of blood and desperation and they radiated their deluded urges to kill.

They were deranged sheep that thought themselves to be predators.

Sakura was a hawk perched among the branches. Her every muscle still. Waiting. The cold air had left her body desperate to shiver but the hawk refused. She had waited for hours, she would not give in just as her prey had appeared.

The furry one released a squirrel. Their interest focused. The sheep leaned in.

Her blade danced through the darkness. The heat of their blood warmed what had chilled without the sun. Her henge dropped to glint crimson under the moon. The scroll of earth was found in the furry one's fluff.

The hawk picked up her pack-mates and took flight. A crying girl and two unconscious bodies melted to water behind her. She passed unseen until the wooden nest.

The doors opened smoothly. Well oiled hinges made no noise.

She searched the room with careful, battle-ready eyes. She fought the urge to apply her protective paint. She knew her energy was dangerously low.

The room was empty. A single light on the ceiling illuminating it in a soft glow. A paper on the wall filled with painted meanings.

It took the hawk seven slow read throughs to understand the riddle. She placed her pack-mates in the most defensible corner and went to the other side of the wooden nest to open the scrolls.

She pulled them open. They begun spewing smoke. She flowed over back the room to stand before her pack-mates, the smooth unsheathing of her claw ringing through the room. A figure appeared in the smoke and she snarled silently.

“Hey!” The threat said before pausing, their head looking around the room. It wasn’t until they turned that the hawk begun to relax, a familiarity to the man’s war wound easing her stance. The threat caught sight of her and paled, turning fully and raising his hands to show he was not holding any claws. As he moved forward she skittered backwards, her hand tightening around the grip of her blade.

“Sakura.” The man said, his voice soft. It sparked another burst of familiarity.

Of trust.

She felt trust.

Her claw lowered.

“Is it safe?” She asked, her voice was rough.

“It’s safe here.” The familiar man confirmed. “Are the boys okay?”

“They’re sleeping.” She said. “The black one was bitten by the snake-man.”

“Snake man?”

“Orochimaru.” She spat, the sheer anger in her voice causing her to sway and stumble a step.

“It’s alright Sakura. You three passed. You can rest now.” The man crooned, his gentle hands removing her sword from her grip and coming to hold her shoulders, softly guiding her to her knees.

“Ibiki. The scarred man.” Sakura said, green eyes feverish in their intensity, and he looked down at her quizzically. “My test. The snake man owns the boy and the sound.”

Her world went black.

-

Sakura awoke to an odd sensation of numbness. Like she was drowning in molasses, her entire body feeling like thousands of pounds but lacking the sensation of touch.

Her green eyes roamed the room, taking in the wooden walls, trio of soft beds- including the one she was on- and the giant, hulking man sitting at her bedside. In response to her looking at him he scowled, the expression pulling the pair of near vertical slashes on his face.

“Talk, Missy.” He growled. “I need a connection between Kabuto and Orochimaru and I need it fast.”

The world clicked into place, a thousand theories and memories of hours of ruminating as she waited for someone to spring the trap slotting together. She hissed as her body became a world of pain. Morino looked like he was about to snap at her again but she beat him to it.

“Throughout the interactions between Kabuto and the rookie nine his eyes lingered a little longer on Sasuke, he answered a greater volume of the Uchiha’s questions and he allowed the Uchiha the pick of the cards. It would not be incorrect to say that Sasuke and Kabuto had a conversation that everyone else was present for, though this was less obvious to most because Sasuke usually leads conversations he’s interested in anyways.

“Then, Sasuke was attacked by Orochimaru. He focused specifically on the Uchiha, made focused and specific references to Uchiha Itachi to garner an emotional reaction from Sasuke, drove him into demonstrating his prowess with the Sharingan at which point he deemed Sasuke worthy and he gave him the mark on his neck.

“The chances of two capable shinobi who showed unusual focus and obsession with Sasuke coincidentally appearing simultaneously are almost negligible. They have to be connected.”

She breathed in and gathered her thoughts, the scarred man had a considering look in his eyes.

“Orochimaru’s attack was threefold. First, he demonstrated overwhelming power, both physically and mentally. He broke down Sasuke’s emotional state and very clearly demonstrated he was simply

playing with us throughout the fight. Second, he shared his power with Sasuke; he clearly alluded to the thing on Sasuke's neck being some kind of power boost, and implied it would have a compulsive affect to cause Sasuke to seek him out. Third, he positioned a contact point with him on the ground. A trusted friend to subtly nudge Sasuke in the direction of seeking power above all else and act as a go-between between the two. It's a recruitment drive."

Morino frowned down at her.

"Look, Kabuto is a fucking liar with a mass of highly confidential information sitting in his pocket. I hardly see why you need more reasons to drag him into T&I." She snapped. He snorted.

"It'll do." The giant man made to leave before pausing in the doorway to turn intense eyes back at her. "As of now the events that occurred within the forest of death are a level six classification. Being found discussing these events, including the mark on Uchiha Sasuke's neck, until such time as the incidents are resolved will be considered treason." She nodded, he shut the door on the way out, only for it to be immediately slammed open again.

"SAKURA-CHAN!" Uzumaki cried, a flying blur of orange and yellow that landed on her chest and reminded her of exactly how much her body hurt.

"Hey, Naruto." She tilted her head to catch a glimpse of black spikes over the orange. "Hey Sasuke. How're things?"

"WE DID IT!" Naruto screamed, leaping off her to bounce on the bed next to hers as he cheered. "You totally got us to the tower, thank you by the way that was SUPER COOL! Iruka-sensei was there when I woke up and he explained everything, apparently you were like super out of it when he appeared so he got us all into bed and waited for one of us to wake up to explain some weirdo poetry and congratulate us on passing. You might also want to take a shower, we aren't allowed to have medical help until after the third task and we didn't want to strip you naked or anything so we just wiped off your clothes and most of the blood out of your hair."

"Thank you, Naruto." Sakura said, interrupting the word vomit. "So we're inside the tower?"

"Yep! There's a cafeteria down the hall and all of the finished teams get their own rooms but we're totally not allowed any interaction with the outside!"

“What day is it?”

“It’s the morning of day four.” Uchiha said, Sakura focused on him and frowned. His skin had an unhealthy, waxy pallor and his eyes had deep lines under them. A glance at the Uzumaki revealed the worried look in his eyes, too. “Both the Dobe and I woke up yesterday. You slept for two days straight.”

She groaned and pushed herself up and into a sitting position, running a hand through her hair and grimacing as it cracked with dried blood. “I’m going to shower.” She said, forcing herself to her feet. “The next round will be one-on-one matchups, so I’d recommend scouting out who has actually passed.” She directed this mostly to the Uchiha. He looked like he really needed something to do. Every passing moment without something to focus on was leading to his face getting angrier and angrier. He nodded and left the room.

“Oi teme! Wait for me!” The Uzumaki called, following hot on his heels in a signal of his own concern.

Sakura forced herself into the small attached bathroom. Grimaced at the sight of herself in the mirror.

Her skin looked drawn and pale, there were purple bags under her eyes, and there were streaks of red through her pink hair and in the cracks of her skin. Her qipao was scuffed and dusty and stained and there was a purple bruise over her right bicep. She didn’t look any less of a mess naked, either, but at least the scorching hot water managed to soothe her aching muscles.

Showered, in a fresh pair of clothes and filled with renewed determination; Sakura headed for the cafeteria and the table with her boys.

“Alright, let’s talk game plans.”

(Even the Uchiha didn’t argue the need to discuss strategy.)

Beating up Children for Fun and Profit

Chapter Summary

These children have no idea what they're getting into. Sakura would almost feel bad about using such underhanded tactics to win except... wait.

No she wouldn't.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Congratulations on passing the second test!” Announced the Hokage, somehow commanding an aura of power whilst hunched, wrinkly and wearing a stupid hat.

Five teams had passed. All of the rookie nine, though Team Asuma and Kurenai had only appeared at the last moment, just barely making it to the tower on time. Suna's team apparently smashed the exam record, appearing at the tower in under two hours, and Team Gai had arrived the morning after Sakura got Team Kakashi to the tower.

Morino was standing with the instructors, but Kabuto's team was conspicuously absent.

“There is something I'd like you to know.” Started the Hokage and Sakura perked up from her position at the very back of the group of genin. “It concerns the true reason for this exam.”

She lost interest again. Instead, she took to watching Hatake and Maito manage to have a pissing match whilst not looking at each other and standing perfectly still.

“Why do we have allied countries taking the exam together? ‘To promote friendship among the countries. To raise the level of shinobi.’ I don't want you to be confused about the true meaning. This exam is...”

The pair were pouring more and more of their chakra into their auras, each trying to outdo the other in sheer presence.

“...a replacement for war among the allied countries.”

Maito began visibly sparkling. Pumping so much chakra into the air it was manifesting as visibly. Hatake went noticeably white around the edges.

“If you go back in time, the current allies were enemies who fought over who could rule. In order to prevent wasteful fighting, the stage that these countries chose to do battle, that is the origins of the chūnin exam.”

Sakura tilted her head. If that was how the exams started then it was certainly an interesting beginning. Much of the literature she could access about the first chūnin exams only talked about the high death tolls, describing exams where only one or two children would actually survive to be promoted. The idea that it was essentially a hunger game’s premise was interesting.

Having been quiet and attentive for longer than a few minutes, the Uzumaki predictably became loud and distracting.

“Why the hell do we have to do that crap?!” He screamed, an orange explosion at the very front of the kids. “Isn’t this thing for deciding who’s a chūnin?!” Sakura sighed. Sometimes she really had to wonder how the Uzumaki hadn’t picked up a single thing from Hatake’s lessons.

Of course, in the fashion of the man’s truly abysmal emotional range, all of his ‘lessons’ were given in insult format, but still. The Uzumaki should have absorbed something by now, even if just via osmosis.

“It is a fact that this exam decides which shinobi have what it takes to become a chūnin. But on the other hand, this exam has another side, where each country’s shinobi risk their lives to protect the land’s prestige. Watching this exam will be leaders and influential individuals from many countries who make up the clients of shinobi. And the leaders of the countries will also be there to watch each of your battles. If the strength of the country is clear, that country will receive more clients. And conversely if seen as weak, they will lose clients. This will signal to potential enemies that ‘our village has this much power’. It will send a political message to outsiders.”

Never one to be outdone by the volume of the blonde, the Inuzuka took that moment to express his complete lack of understanding of his chosen career. “Yeah but why?! Why do we have to risk our lives in battle?!”

“The strength of the country is the strength of the village. The

strength of the village is the strength of the shinobi. And a shinobi's true strength is only born through life or death battle. This is not just a test. This is a life or death battle with your dreams and country's prestige on the line."

A man stepped forward. A very sickly, half-dead looking man. He coughed.

"Hello, everyone I'm the third exam's referee. Gekkō Hayate." He wheezed. Sakura stared. "Before the third test there's something I'd like you to do." He withered before her eyes, seeming to become more and more husk-like with every word. "Umm... It's a preliminary for the third test, to decide who gets to participate in the main event."

"What do you mean?!" The Nara shouted, suddenly motivated by the threat of having to do more work than he expected.

"The first and second test may have been too easy this year, we have bit too many people remaining. We must have a preliminary and reduce the number of participants for the third test. As Hokage-sama indicated earlier, there will be many guests at the third test, so the fights could take too long. We are limited in time."

She had heard the rumours, of course, that Gekkō Hayate was permanently sickly. It was just... a lot in person.

"Those who feel like quitting after those explanations, please come forward now. Since we will be starting the preliminary immediately." The man said before turning slightly and devolving into a coughing fit.

No one came forward. The genin simply watched the best kenjutsu expert in the village make a valiant attempt at coughing until he either died or passed out. Judging by the complete non-reactions from the surrounding jōnin and chūnin, this was a regular occurrence. Sakura glanced at the Uchiha, watched the way his hands shook and he swayed lightly on his feet, and considered trying to get him to quit.

But he wouldn't. If the kid was lucky his match would be on early. Maybe Hatake had bribed someone for it.

"The preliminary will consist of one on one fighting. You will basically fight as if in a real life confrontation." Gekkō said after it became clear no one was forfeiting. "Since we have fifteen entrants, we will conduct seven matches and then the winner of the last match will fight the fifteenth entrant. Umm, the winners will advance to the third test.

“The fight continues until one of you dies or is knocked out or admits defeat. If you don’t want to die then quickly forfeit, but when I decide that the winner has been established I’ll jump in and stop things, since we don’t want to pointlessly increase the number of corpses.” His tone was matter of fact. Sakura took a moment to enjoy this world’s blasé attitude towards children killing each other.

“This electric scoreboard will show the matchups for each battle. This is sudden but let’s announce the two names of the first fight.”

‘Aburame Shino vs Uchiha Sasuke’

Lucky for Uchiha.

-

The first fight was quick and brutal. The Aburame was best at long range and drawn out fights, where he could take full advantage of his kikaichū. He didn’t have the taijutsu abilities to hold up against a prodigy like the Uchiha, even as sickly as the kid currently was.

The Aburame knew this. The Uchiha knew this. The proctors knew this.

He mass drained as much of Uchiha’s chakra as possible before being knocked out in only two or three hits. The only surprise was Sasuke using a number of the moves Lee had used against him before the first exam.

Sakura had not expected him to be such a master of the Sharingan already.

In a few years, the Uchiha would be a monster.

“Uchiha Sasuke has passed the prelims!”

-

‘Sabako no Gaara vs Sabako no Kankuro’

“I forfeit!”

“Sabako no Gaara has passed the prelims!”

-

‘Nara Shikamaru vs Akimichi Chōji’

“Ah man! It’s the fatass against the lazy bum! Boring!!” Uzumaki cried and Sakura smiled.

“I almost feel bad for Chōji.”

“Nara Shikamaru has passed the prelims!”

Hatake returned smelling of ink and with a noticeable tension in his spine.

“Kakashi-sensei!”

“How’s Sasuke?”

“He’s fine. He’s sleeping in a hospital bed.”

The subsequent hair ruffles lingered a little longer than usual.

-

‘Hyuuga Hinata vs Hyuuga Neji’

Uzumaki’s hand was covered in the Hyuuga girl’s blood. His chakra filled the room, burning with righteous fury. Sakura’s hand gripped the railing. She’d never seen the blonde look so determined before, and that was saying *a lot*.

“You.” He snarled, almost a growl as he pointed his bloody fist at the Hyuuga prodigy. “Are going down.”

Most of the spectators scoffed.

Sakura believed it.

“Hyuuga Neji has passed the prelims!”

-

‘Inuzuka Kiba vs Rock Lee’

“Serves the annoying bastard right!”

“Rock Lee has passed the prelims!”

-

‘Uzumaki Naruto vs Tenten’

“GIVE HER HELL NARUTO!!”

“Maa Sakura-chan, it’s unusual to see you so... exuberant.”

The ground was strewn with kunai and shuriken and strangely shaped swords. The roof of the building was blurred with the lingering smoke of hundreds of popped clones.

The dark haired girl was buried underneath a mountain of orange, her never ending supply of weaponry just slightly slower than the Uzumaki’s never ending supply of shadow clones.

“Uzumaki Naruto has passed the prelims!”

“WE ARE THE SUPERIOR GENIN TEAM!!!”

“YEAH! YEAH!! BELIEVE IT!!!”

“Hahaha... you two sure are competitive little monsters.”

-

‘Haruno Sakura vs Yamanaka Ino’

“Don’t wear yourself out too much, Sakura-chan, you’ll have another match after this.” Hatake drawled. Sakura beamed earnestly back at him from her position in middle of the room.

“Don’t worry, sensei! This will be a great warm up!”

She turned to see a pissed off blonde glaring across from her. An equally pissed of looking Sarutobi glaring at the nonchalant Hatake on the balcony behind her.

“DON’T GET AHEAD OF YOURSELF, UGLY FOREHEAD SAKURA!!”
The Yamanka shrieked.

Sakura’s mind raced. She had a few options for this fight, but if she wanted to end it quickly, without giving away her techniques or proficiency and using as little energy as possible she would need to bait the blonde into overplaying her hand. Sakura smirked.

If she played this right, she wouldn’t even have to move from her spot. She crossed her arms and sighed, a brow visibly ticked on the Yamanaka’s face.

“Let’s get this over with.”

“Who do you think you are?!” The Yamanaka yelled, pointing a finger accusingly at her. Sakura picked at a nail. She waited for the other girls frustration levels to visibly climb before answering.

“I think. I’m out of your league.”

“You’re just some ugly bookworm trying to steal Sasuke from me!”

Sakura missed the pre-puberty Ino that taught her how to braid when her mother was too busy to do her hair before school. She did her best Uchiha impression and looked down her nose like she was looking at a particularly disgusting piece of rotten fish.

“Tch.” She said. “I don’t even need these for you.” And with that she slowly and pointedly unstrapped her numerous weapon pouches, letting them thump to the ground behind her. Turning her back on the other girl entirely as she did. A clear showing of looking down on her. She unclipped her chokutō from her belt and set it gently against concrete. The Yamanaka scowled, her hands fisted angrily by her sides, but still made no move to be the first to attack.

Smart. But Sakura was better.

Sakura smirked and used her hands to crack her neck. “You scared?” She swept her arms out and crooned mockingly. “I’ll even let you take a free hit.” Her smirk widened. “Or are you too worried about breaking a nail?” She fluttered her eyelashes.

The Yamanaka snapped. Her shriek echoed through the building. She launched herself across the arena. In her anger, the blonde telegraphed her moves and developed tunnel vision, zeroing into Sakura’s face and the taunting smirk.

It was simple to slide her foot into the right position and sweep the girl’s legs once she got within range, moving over the other girl to twist her hands behind her back and pin her to the ground, one knee pressing down her neck and the other on the small of her back.

The Yamanaka screamed and thrashed, but Sakura simply looked up to the exhausted looking Gekkō.

“The battle cannot be continued, Winner Haruno Sakura!” She stepped off the blonde and hooked a hand under the girl’s armpit to pull her upright.

“Don’t touch me forehead girl!” Yamanaka spat before stalking over to

where her jōnin sensei had jumped down to collect her. On the balcony the Akimichi was eating chips with a worried expression on his face and the Nara was groaning into his hands.

Sakura glanced to her own team, Uzumaki was cheering and bouncing on the edge of the railing with a brilliant smile on his face and, when she looked, Hatake gave her a small thumbs up.

She concentrated on her breathing and let her mind whirl as she strapped her weaponry back on.

“Alright the final battle to determine the last participant in the finals will begin shortly.” Gekkō said, indicating for the other contest to come down. Temari landed quietly on the concrete, her strides smooth and predatory as she unhooked the giant war fan from her back.

Sakura’s eyes narrowed. She didn’t have the chakra reserves to outlast the other girl’s attacks and she wouldn’t have the strength to brute force through the fan’s wind bursts. She wouldn’t be able to play nice. A plan locked into place.

She committed the pattern of the wall behind the Suna genin to memory.

“Begin!” Gekkō. Predictably, Temari opened the fan and settled into a defensive position. Sakura kept her face carefully neutral and pulled one hand in a seal above her head, another forming a seal over her chest. She breathed in, breathed out, and exhaled thick, white mist.

Without a body of water to draw the mist from, the technique was incredibly chakra intensive, draining half of her reserves at the very least. But Sakura was not just creating mist, she was thickening it until it was entirely opaque and doing it *quickly*. It only took a few seconds, but those few seconds sucked most of her reserves away.

She only just had enough to make a single water clone and settle a henge over herself without immediately passing out, sprinting across the room and locking her chakra signature down to nothing. She had just reached the far wall, pressing herself against it, when the powerful wave of air rushed through the stadium.

Her clone dutifully cried out as it was blown backwards from where it had launched itself at Temari, shielding its face against the battering air. Temari placed a hand on her hip and smirked cockily at the panting clone.

“How boring.” She said. “My wind trumps your mist.”

The clone gritted its teeth, tightening its hold on a kunai and screamed. “Don’t underestimate me!!” It launched itself at the genin, yelling distractingly all the while and clearly telegraphing its swing.

Temari drew her fan back and swung, intent on generating another burst of wind.

At the same time Sakura launched herself off the wall, kunai in hand, looking like a piece of the very wall she had left. A blur of brown over the white concrete. The spiky haired girl sensed something and looked over her shoulder at the last moment but she had already committed her full body to swinging the heavy fan. She had enough time to widen her eyes in surprise before the kunai hilt was smashing into her temple and she dropped like a puppet with her strings cut.

Sakura let her techniques drop, the clone melting into water and her henge disappearing.

She looked up to the surprised faces of the Proctors. Gekkō coughed.

“Haruno Sakura has passed the prelims.”

She was hit by an orange blur, staggering back under the weight of Uzumaki’s tackle-hug.

“SAKURA-CHAN WE MADE IT!!!” He pulled back, grabbing on of her hands in his and pumping them into the air victoriously. “TEAM KAKASHI IS GOING TO THE FINALS!!!” He cheered. Sakura laughed as a hand ruffled their hair.

“Good job, Sakura-chan.” Hatake praised, eye smiling down at them.

“Sensei,” She slurred, swaying violently, the tell tale numbness of chakra exhaustion edging into her limbs. “I’m tired.”

She registered the ground rushing up to her and arms looping around her front before the world went black.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus update cause it's my birthday. Truly, what a wonderful way to celebrate the endless march towards the quagmire of adulthood.

Also thank you all so much! It's actually surreal how much

support this fic has been getting. Who knew people would actually enjoy my shitty sense of humour??? Thank you??!!

DON'T. MEET. YOUR. HEROES.

Chapter Summary

"Anko?"

"Anko."

Sakura spent two days in the hospital connected to an IV. Apparently, spending hours in a state of extreme chakra exhaustion followed by not seeking medical attention and then driving herself to chakra exhaustion again within only a few days was a bit Not Good. She spent a solid two hours after she woke up being lectured by a stern Hyuuga woman.

According to the medic, she came very close to doing permanent damage to her chakra coils, and it was a miracle that she didn't use that last little bit of chakra that would do so. Sakura didn't think the woman would like being told that it wasn't luck, but her phenomenal chakra control. At least now she knew she could do it again with no permanent damage so long as she left that two percent behind.

(She didn't mention this newfound knowledge to the Hyuuga either, somehow she thought it would be classed as a bit Very Not Good.)

The hospital was nice, she spent a lot of time in other people's rooms and exploring. Most of the rookie nine showed up with regularity; considering that her, the Uchiha and Hinata were in the hospital (even if she was the only one awake) and they all had interesting stories to tell from the second exam. Neither Uzumaki nor Hatake appeared, but the jōnin had left a note filled with cryptic statements about the road of life that basically boiled down to Hatake being busy making sure the village didn't collapse and the Uchiha didn't die, Uzumaki being palmed off to another teacher, and her having been "requested" by someone who would "contact her".

She was suspicious but, frankly, she felt like she deserved the rest and resolved not to think about it until after she'd been discharged.

When she was jumped by a pair of ANBU on her way home, quickly and efficiently knocked out to wake up strapped to a chair in a cell, she considered that maybe that had been a mistake.

The walls of the cell were a stark white, a metal table and a basic

metal chair before her. The door was an outline in the wall without a handle on the inside. There were metal straps around her wrists and ankles and she'd been stripped of all of her weaponry.

There were bobby pins in her hair. Latches on the straps that could be jimmied open if she really tried.

She frowned. Considered her options. Stopped considering her options.

Realised she was done with the entire scenario.

Bent over until she could wiggle a bobby pin out of her hair. Jimmied the latches open. Walked over to the door. It was a seal-based lock, set to a series of different chakra signatures. Theoretically, only the people calibrated into the seal could open the lock.

Or, someone who had obsessively trained themselves to mimic other people's signatures.

She concentrated, did her best to remember the feeling of Morino's signature, and felt it slide into place like a slightly too well worn key. It fit the general shape but too many of the notches had worn down to actually turn it. A few headache-inducing minutes of 'jiggling' with her signature and the door clicked open and swung inwards.

She pulled her signature down to nothing, hinged into the solid white of the ceiling's paint colouring, and crawled her way down the hall upside down. She passed rows and rows of white doors before the building became more personal. A poster on the walls here, an opened door leading to a cluttered office there. It wasn't until she passed a break room that she paused.

There was a banner on one wall that said 'welcome to hell', a table with an overwhelming array of alcohol bottles and a single bowl of chips on it, two grey uniform clad shinobi playing a game of shoji in the middle of the room and around thirty shinobi on various chairs and couches around the pair, hands exchanging money and all extremely, unnaturally focused on the match. Sakura recognised a number of said shinobi.

She wished she didn't.

Feeling bold, she crawled into the room and across the ceiling, pausing just above an empty space on a giant, red, velvet couch. A number of members of the room- including the two on either side of

the space- jumped violently as she let her feet dangle, only her hands sticking to the ceiling, for a moment to position them and then dropping. Landing deftly with her legs crossed on the couch and undoing her henge and the hold on her chakra.

“Good...” Sakura paused here, realising she had no idea if it was morning or night or the apocalypse or anything. “...day senpai’s! What brings you here?” She asked, an innocent smile on her face as she looked between Hagane and Kamizuki.

“Well if it isn’t our cute little kohai!” Said Hagane, a beaming smile on his face. Something in Sakura relaxed, knowing she hadn’t misread the situation and wasn’t being arrested and tried with treason. “I know this is your party, but you’re a little early!”

“How are you here? We left the chair nice and easy for you but that cell was locked with a level six seal.” Asked Kamizuki. Sakura blinked at him.

“Oh yeah, I can open those.” She offered, very unhelpfully.

“How?!” Asked an incredulous shinobi on a opposite armchair. Her brain distantly recognised him as Mibu Shinobu.

“How indeed.” A voice like crushed gravel came from the doorway, Morino appearing through it like a spectre. His face was impassive as he looked down at her, but there was a manic gleam in his eyes that she was pretty sure was excitement.

“OI ASSHOLES!!” Screamed the surprisingly very modestly clothed Mitsarashi Anko. Sakura had to dodge a thrown dango stick. “SHUT UP OR LEAVE!!” With that she turned her full attention back on the shoji match.

“Come on.” Said Morino, walking out the door and gesturing to follow. Sakura scrambled to keep up.

“See you in a bit little kohai!” Hagane called after her. As she turned a corner she dimly heard swearing and the thumps of breaking furniture.

“Explain.” Demanded Morino, long strides eating up the hallway and causing her to have to run slightly to keep up.

“The seal was keyed to different chakra signatures.” She said and he nodded. “I can mimic chakra signatures.”

His steps faltered for a second and feverish eyes turned to look at her. "Interesting." The eyes narrowed. "Can anyone else do this or is it unique to you?"

"It's not a Kekkai Genkai, it's just very, very good chakra control. Theoretically everyone could, but realistically I know of only me and Orochimaru." She paused. "Though his attempt wasn't as good as mine, he could probably get into any seal with five or more signatures keyed into it, but nothing higher than that."

"Right." His tone was dour. "Let's hope he hasn't worked that one out yet." He didn't sound optimistic. They rounded another corner to arrive at a lobby, a manned desk to their left, waiting chairs to their right, and a set of glass doors showing off the midday sunlight. "Shizuka!" He barked and the woman behind the desk jumped and turned to look wide-eyed at him. "I want every level four seal and above upgraded to a level nine by the end of the day, code blue."

She paled. "Y-yes Ibiki-san."

Morino continued across the lobby and opened a door, leading to a well organised but extremely full office. He sat behind the desk and gestured to one of the chairs before it. Sakura sat.

"Right, you skipped out on the introduction, but I'll speed through the basics and then we'll get on to the tour." He said before slamming a binder as thick as the width of her palm in front of her. "I own you for the next month. Forget about going home, forget about seeing your friends, forget about even eating what you want. This," He tapped a finger on the cover of the binder. Sakura hesitantly pulled it over to herself and opened it to find a meticulously organised and colour coded schedule. The whole page was one day, with instructions down to every five minutes. It included bowel movements. "Is your life for the next twenty eight days. When you come out of it you *will* be adequate."

Her head tilted. "For what?"

His smile was jagged. "ANBU training. I know potential when I see it, girly, and I will make you brilliant if I have to break you to do it."

"I look forward to it, Ibiki-sensei." She said, echoing his smile.

-

"These are the staff bathrooms, I highly recommend you use these

ones and only these ones, some of the *visitors* can get a little messy.”

Sakura eyed the room. It may have been white, once, but now it was covered almost entirely in cat posters, down to posters meticulously wrapped around the taps.

Should she ask?

“And the cats?” She had to know. Morino sighed.

“Anko.”

-

“Never enter this room on Thursdays.”

The room held nothing but a single, wooden chair. Sakura pursed her lips slightly, for the thousandth time this tour wondering if it would be okay to ask.

“Never. Enter. This room on Thursdays.”

Apparently not then.

“Why?” She couldn’t help it, she had to know.

The man scratched at a scar- something she was learning was the equivalent of rubbing his temples- and sighed.

“Anko.”

-

“These are all cells we never use for prisoners unless we’re really full, so it’s pretty common for members of the staff to crash here when they’ve worked too late. You’ll stay in one of them for the duration of month. It is not, however, your space by any means so I’d recommend carrying everything with you, other wise it’ll be considered fair game and disappear.”

“Turtle print bedsheets.” She said, entirely bewildered. One of the rooms had an iron maiden in it, and yet it also had green, cartoon, turtle print bedsheets on the bed. “Anko?”

“Anko.”

-

“You two do realise that I’m only thirteen, right?”

“We’re *shinobi* Sakuuura. Live a little, see the world, become a star, get roaring drunk with your coworkers and fellow denizens of hell.”

“What he means is that using any excuse for a party is a time honoured tradition among T&I.”

-

“I mean, don’t you ever just feel like your outside doesn’t ma-hec-atch your insides?”

“I know ExACtLY what you mean my man. Some days I wake up and I think I’m a sixty three year old man, and then I look in the mirror and it’s like woAHoAH”

“Totally, totally. Did I ever tell you about the one time I thought I’d turned into a cat?”

-

“It’s two o’clock, time to fill out your profile!”

“Wh-what?”

“Here, here it’s tradition, you have to fill one out for everyone you met.”

“Blood type? Childhood dream? Most common nightmare? Aren’t these a little too weird to know after only talking to a person once?”

“Nothings too weird for T&I, Pinky.”

-

Sakura woke to a splitting headache and the burning desire to learn enough medical jutsu to heal her future hangovers. It took her a minute to realise the pounding sound was not, in fact, her throbbing head but actually the sound of someone walking around the room she’d passed out in.

“Get up.” A surprisingly soft voice said before an alarmingly heavy weight dropped onto her stomach.

She rolled over, just barely managed to open her eyes and pushed herself up to standing. Her stomach rolled. In her hands- she’d caught

the bundle before it could fall off the bed- was a small bag with a change of basic workout gear, including black pants and a white tank top, as well as a series of body weights. She looked over at the truly depressed looking man standing in the corner of the room, covering his eyes and grimacing. She recognised him as Hamada Kioshi, a tokubetsu jōnin she'd heard was 'disgustingly cheery'. He'd won a significant amount of money from yesterday's shoji match and decided to celebrate. Heavily.

His face was green.

"What time is it?" She asked, already dressing in the provided gear. There was no use in putting off the inevitable and shinobi had no room for modesty.

"Five thirty." He replied.

"And we're doing what, exactly?"

"Taijutsu."

Sakura could only hope the man could manage without throwing up on her.

-

The man could manage.

Oh god, he could manage.

Her morning was two and a half hours of getting flattened into the dirt. Over and over and over again. No breaks, no holding back, just endless fighting.

The man had hobbled and swayed and threatened to puke all the way to the training ground and then he'd *transformed*. Into an absolute *demon*.

She winced as her thigh brushed the edge of a desk, the purple-black bruise flaring wildly with the tiny touch. She'd had enough time to shower before the binder was sending her off to something called 'Archives and Statistics'. It sounded innocent enough, but they were shinobi. Appearances were *usually* deceiving.

Sakura would *know*.

She scanned the rest of her schedule, feeling her eyes catch on

‘Torture Resistance Training’, ‘Physical Conditioning’ and ‘Advanced Physical Conditioning’. Flipping through the booklet she realised that every day started with a taijutsu block, often followed by ninjutsu or kenjutsu training, and ended with physical conditioning. There was also seduction techniques, code breaking, advanced strategy, historical re-education and anatomy.

The most worrying, however, was that every Thursday had a five hour block marked off with various colours of glitter pens and the words ‘Being Anko’s Minion!’ Surrounded by poorly drawn hearts.

She couldn’t help but notice the timeline matched up with the warnings about The Room.

She worried.

Oh god, she worried.

Sakura breathed in deeply and carefully, choosing to ignore the binder in her arms for now in favour of entering the crooked door within which she was meant to be starting whatever ‘Archives and Statistics’ was.

Looking around the barely lit, dusty space and spotting a pair of chūnin hunched over a desk surrounded by person-high stacks of paper, their fevered eyes having snapped up to hers the moment she entered, she didn’t think she was going to like it.

(She really, really didn’t.)

-

“...Minion! Go get me dango!...”

“...When a man’s penis reaches what we in the business like to call maximum flex...”

“... twelve places on the human body are considered ideal for flaying...”

“...SO HELP ME HARUNO YOU WILL GET UP THAT CLIFF OR I WILL THROW YOU OFF IT MYSELF...”

“...this technique essentially makes you < cough > completely invisible aside from a slight warping...”

“...anything greater than a two point four percent rise in agricultural

production has historically coincided with a subsequent steady decline in harvest yields, leading to the theory of...”

-

A large hand clapped her shoulder, something that would have sent her stumbling a month ago but now just left her slightly tender.

“Decent job, girly. Take tomorrow to rest.” Morino said, a surprising amount of warmth in the gruff man’s voice. “That green kid won’t know what hit him.”

She smiled.

beating up children for fun and DEFENDING MY SENSEI!!

Chapter Summary

In which Sakura beats up one blur of green and mentally scars the other.

“Hey, Naruto!” Sakura called- having pried herself from the grips of her parents with the promise to find them once the exam was over- and the orange blob turned with a bright smile on his face.

“SAKURA-CHAN!” He yelled. “I haven’t see you or the teme in ages! Kakashi-sensei made me train with this weirdo pervert, but then he got beaten up by an even weirder pervert! So I had to train under the super pervert instead and there were all these toads!”

Sakura smiled and followed the babbling blob into the stadium, watching the casual confidence in the way he moved. It seemed they’d both gotten stronger.

Lee, Nara, the Suna monster and Hyuuga were already in the competitors area. Lee was practically bouncing off the walls in his enthusiasm whilst Nara was napping in a corner and the other two were brooding into their respective horizons. Only the Uchiha was absent, likely being held up by Hatake’s poor time keeping skills.

Sakura waved at Gekkō as he strolled in, smiling as the sickly man raised a hand to wave back only to double over in a coughing fit. He’d been her kenjutsu and stealth instructor for the past month, but had made it very clear that he wouldn’t show any favouritism.

(As if he ever would, just like every other instructor Morino dumped her with, he was an absolute *demon* underneath the sickly visage.)

“Alright, we’ll have to head down, we don’t have the < cough > time to wait for Uchiha Sasuke.” He said, only for Hatake and Uchiha to appear in an overdramatic swirl of leaves.

“Sorry we’re late.” Hatake said, despite looking entirely unapologetic. Gekkō sighed.

“Get in line, Uchiha.” He gestured to the group and the kid slotted into place as they headed for the stadium.

The fighting ground was surrounded by imposing walls, thousands of onlookers cheering and heckling them as they lined up behind Gekkō in the centre of the pit. The air was thick with chakra, the amount of people making it impossible to differentiate individual signatures in the stands. Instead, the arena was surrounded by a wall of white noise.

The fighting ground itself was a mix of elements, a series of ponds and sparse trees and boulders creating a variety of environments and obstacles whilst still leaving the area easily observed from above.

Gekkō stood tall in the centre flanked by the Uchiha and the Hyuuga. The next most outermost spots were taken up by the Uzumaki and the Suna monster, followed by the Nara and Lee. Sakura stood to the Nara's right. Awkwardly added onto the end as the uneven tagalong. The afterthought.

She didn't mind the insult. The automatic assumption that she was the weakest of the group.

Sakura knew what she looked like. Next to the group of serious-looking boys, she looked like a joke. Small for her age, clad in a baby blue sleeveless qipao and pristine white pants, her pink hair braided into a practical yet delicate-looking crown braid and nothing more than a few weapons pouches on her thighs and her unassuming chokutō strapped horizontally on her lower back. A clanless nobody that was easy to dismiss as simply getting lucky, even by the people who had seen her fights. They had been quick and dirty. Little more than a few flashy jutsus and hitting them from behind.

Sakura ignored the way the boys were all brooding melodramatically into the middle distance to smile serenely up at the crowd and wave. She knew what she looked like.

She'd worked so hard to cultivate that image, after all.

She settled in to watch the first match. Eyes glued to the figures in the bottom of the arena.

-

'Nara Shikamaru vs Uchiha Sasuke'

The fight was a long one. Whatever the Nara's initial plan had been clearly failed as the Uchiha showed considerably increased speed and taijutsu expertise. The Nara managed to just barely keep Uchiha at

arms distance with a combination of well placed ninja wire and explosion tags, but the Sharingan made it nearly impossible for him to actually catch the Uchiha with his shadows.

Eventually he managed to bluff the Uchiha into a corner by taking a hit from his own explosion tag and capture the kid's shadow in the resulting cloud of dust, but the Nara was visibly sweating and shaky. He wouldn't be able to hold the chakra powerhouse of the Uchiha long.

"I forfeit!" The words rang over the grounds, carrying to the competitors box but likely not the stands. The seal-enhanced voice of Gekkō announced the match result.

The Nara headed to the spectators stand and the Uchiha stalked back into the competitors area (His next fight would be one of the four before the intermission, so he couldn't go to the spectators stands even if he wanted to). He ignored the Uzumaki as he passed and flopped into the seat next to Sakura.

"Good fight." She congratulated.

"Hn." He spat in response, his teeth audibly grinding. Sakura held down a snort and watched the orange ball appear on the grounds.

-

'Uzumaki Naruto vs Hyuuga Neji'

Sakura was desperately trying to stifle giggles. She couldn't help it.

Neji Hyuuga, was telling Uzumaki Naruto he wouldn't amount to anything because of his *birth*. The child of the fourth hokage and the Red Hot Habanero. The village jinchūriki.

If anyone was 'destined' to be Hokage it would be him.

"Truly, the youth of this battle is inspiring, but I am unsure what is quite so funny, Sakura-chan." Lee said, appearing next to her in a whirlwind of green spandex and enthusiasm. From his position brooding next to her, the Uchiha turned to him and glared.

"It's just something Neji said, Lee-san." She smiled ruefully. "You all don't know absolutely anything about Naruto."

"Neji is the strongest leaf genin, Naruto cannot possibly win." The

poor idiot sounded genuinely confused.

Uchiha scoffed and Sakura hummed knowingly.

Corrosive chakra flooded the arena. Uzumaki's back bent and his nails lengthened. The air was acid in her lungs. A vicious smirk stretched her face.

“WINNER UZUMAKI NARUTO!”

The crowd cheered. The Hyuuga was carried off on a stretcher and Uzumaki was shepherded into the spectator's stands.

“Fight well.” Uchiha said melodramatically, barely a whisper against the crowd's roars.

“Of course, Sasuke-kun!” Her voice was teasing and full of cheer, the Uchiha 'tch'ed and turned away from her, but the very tips of his ears were pink.

She headed into the arena. A green blur on her heels.

“AND NOW THE NEXT MATCH! ROCK LEE AND HARUNO SAKURA!”

They positioned at opposite sides of the arena, falling into their starting stances.

“I look forward to an invigorating match Sakura-chan!” Lee said, a patronising smile on his face and casual confidence in his frame. He was underestimating her. Her easy smile sharpened to show far too many teeth.

“Me too, Lee-kun.” She purred. “I do hope you can challenge me.”

Lee looked thrown, his stance loosened slightly.

“BEGIN!”

She leapt away, followed half a second later by a green blur, and she threw a volley of shuriken, darting towards the trees. He deflected them easily and continued, rapidly gaining ground on her.

She continued throwing weapons, keeping him just busy enough that he couldn't catch up to her at the pace she was going. She danced continuously out of his reach, circling through the arena as she went. After a few minutes of ducking and dodging and throwing she threw herself between two trees, turning around to focus on the green blur

as it followed and throwing her hands into a seal.

Just as Lee passed between the trunks they exploded, a burst of chakra setting off the explosive tags attached to kunai and shuriken she had thrown. The strategic placement overlooked in the volley of weapons.

Thrown through the air by the force of the explosion, a mass of wood and dust spreading over the arena and leaving streaks and grazes over her bare skin, she used the moment of chaos to disguise a series of hand seals. A clone rose out of the water and almost immediately masked its chakra, settling into the transparent escape technique. She wasn't yet very good at it, could only hold the effect when perfectly stationary, but her clone didn't need to move. Her chakra stringed and coated it instinctively.

"A truly wonderful plan! I commend you, the beautiful Sakura!" Lee's voice rang out, his green form becoming clear through the dust. A pair of what looked like metal weights in his hands. He dropped them, the weight causing craters to form in the dirt and dust to rise once more. "But I will be ending this match now!"

A blur appeared behind her, she had just enough time to swing around and block the kick with her arms. She let the strength behind it rocket her through the air. Drawing her chokutō and making it crackle and glow with lighting chakra. She landed on her feet just as a fist flew towards her face. She ducked, twisting under his arm and slashing towards the delicate tendons in his elbow. He dodged it but the edge of her blade just caught the spandex. A thin line of red appeared.

He followed with a kick and she spun, throwing herself around the movement and winning another tiny scratch in the vulnerable part of his knee. He kicked and punched and she ducked and weaved. He had a slight advantage in speed and a massive one in taijutsu abilities but she had the advantage of reach from her chokutō and she knew how to milk it for everything it was worth. She took a fist to the ribs and a clip of a foot to a cheekbone but he took dozens of tiny scratches in return. All laced with lighting chakra. All subtly numbing the immediate area and slowing down his muscle movements.

It was showing. He was slowing. His movements were growing sloppy.

He left an opening and she took it, ducking under the too-wide sweep of his leg and slashing across the boy's back, pumping lightening into the wound as she did. He froze up completely and she sighed and relaxed her stance.

“It’s over.” She said, her voice coming out shaky and breathless with fatigue and adrenaline, glancing at the boy’s face only to find him looking intently into the stands.

Apparently he got something out of it. His hands raised, body shaking violently with the strain of fighting the lighting chakra, and his forearms crossed. Then, it was like he exploded. He radiated chakra outwards like a dam overflowing. He stood tall despite the numbing effect that should have been debilitating. His eyes were filled with fire and he was grimacing. A terrible scream tore out of his throat.

He moved. The world broke. Sakura couldn’t do anything but do her best to take the hits in the least damaging places possible- thankfully he seemed disinterested in actually hurting her, his hits went for momentum over damage- as she was thrown into the sky, bandages wrapping around her and Lee appearing above her like a vengeful god. His fist planted into her stomach and she was sent plummeting back to earth. The harsh, unforgiving ground rushing up to meet her.

She let her chakra catch.

She landed gently on top of the water and balanced on the surface as she caught her breath. She pushed herself to standing, one hand wrapping around her aching ribs, and made her way back to the arena’s centre.

The clone’s transparency jutsu had disappeared the moment they swapped. The people in the stands simply watched a girl hit the earth and melt into water. She appeared out of the trees to see Lee on his knees, staring at the place she had been.

He snapped his head around the look at her, open mouthed, and then collapsed.

“WINNER HARUNO SAKURA!”

The crowd roared. Her breath came in pants. Her heartbeat was a furious drumbeat reverberating throughout chest. Her cheeks ached from the size of her smile. She pulled a Naruto, threw up a peace sign, and headed towards the stands, momentarily disappearing into a bathroom to wrap her ribs. A medic team appeared to cart Lee away. A clean up crew would collect her weaponry before the next match.

“SAKURA-CHAN GOOD JOB!!!” Uzumaki screamed, barrelling into her the moment she appeared through the doorway.

“Thank you Naruto, but I would appreciate if you got off me. I think I cracked a couple of ribs.” She laughed and he immediately launched himself away from her, very nearly throwing himself down a set of stairs if not for the gloved hand that caught his collar with practiced ease.

“Are you okay? Do you need to go to medical?” He asked worriedly and she shook her head.

“No medical for the participants until all the matches are finished.” She said. “I’ve still got to beat you and Sasuke into the dirt.”

“Come on, Sakura-chan.” Said Hatake, setting Uzumaki down and twisting to crouch down in front of her. “I’m sure the others are excited to see you.” He said and she climbed onto his back, happily enjoying the time honoured tradition of the most tired being carried home at the end of training. Hatake loped down the steps smoothly, being careful not to jostle her, and she settled so she could watch over his shoulder.

“You just want to rub us into the faces of the other jōnin sensei.” She accused.

“Maa, Sakura-chan, it’s perfectly normal for a sensei to be proud of their adorably ferocious students.” He replied with a faux-wounded tone as they approached Team Asuma and the weapons mistress from Team Gai.

The Nara rounded on them, falling into step next to Hatake to look up at her, brows twitching angrily.

“Explain.” He ground out, eyes flickering in a telltale sign of him overthinking things.

“Explain?” She asked with exaggerated innocence.

“The kawarimi.” He snarled. “There was nothing, no chakra build up, no blurring, no smoke, nothing! It broke all of the basic principles of the jutsu!”

“And?” She asked, feverishly bright brown eyes locked onto her, his face halfway to hysterics.

“That’s impossible.”

“Not for me.” She smiled angelically down at him.

“What the fu-” He started but snapped his mouth shut as Hatake leaned down until his face was a few inches from the brunette, leaking a low level of killing intent. She couldn’t help but notice that he moved specifically so that her weight went onto the side without the throbbing ribs.

“Shikamaru-kun, You wouldn’t happen to be bullying my cute little genin, would you?” Hatake said, his voice half a growl and his eye narrowed dangerously. The Nara gulped and shook his head desperately.

“N-no sir.” He stuttered and it was like a switch was flipped. Hatake straightened, eye smiling and frame relaxed. He shifted his hold on Sakura to only be keeping her up with one hand- once again keeping her weight off her ribs- and used the other to pat the Nara twice on the head.

“Good boy!” He said brightly before loping away to where Naruto was half leaning over the railing. In a fit of childish petulance, Sakura stuck her tongue out at the Nara as he left. He scowled and hunched his way back to the Akimichi, mumbling about ‘troublesome weirdos’ under his breath.

An unfortunately becoming familiar blur of green appeared.

“My Eternal Rival!” Maito boomed and Sakura felt Hatake physically wilt. “Truly your students are the epitome of youth!”

When it became clear that Hatake had no intentions of doing anything but ignore the sparkling man, Sakura took things into her own hands.

“Thank you, Maito-san!” She smiled. “Lee was a very ferocious opponent, you must be proud.”

The man started balling. She mostly aborted the full body flinch, but Hatake managed to radiate a sense of smug amusement despite still pretending to ignore the conversation entirely.

“He truly is such a great guy!” Maito cried. Sakura didn’t think she’d ever seen someone create such a massive volume of tears before. Instead of expressing any of her growing panic, she smiled sweetly and nodded.

“I hope I can spar with him again soon.” She said and, strangely enough, that caused the man to sober. Before she could figure out why, however, they were distracted by the beginning of the next

match.

“SASUKE UCHIHA AND SABAKO NO GAARA! BEGIN!”

Sakura watched the Suna genin as he convulsed and clutched his head, his chakra signature fluctuating wildly, and was filled with a horrible sense of *déjà vu*. She sucked in a sharp, quiet breath.

Hatake's head tilted.

“Sensei...” she began before pausing, wondering whether it was actually anything or just her brain misfiring.

“Pinky?” Hatake prompted, his tone serious.

“It might be nothing, just... That's almost exactly what Naruto looked like, before he lost control in Wave.”

His only response was leaning just a fraction further towards the fight.

The Uchiha was winning, but only by mimicking Lee. If that was all he had in store for the Suna-nin then the fight was going to end poorly.

“What kind of training did you do, for your genin to come this far in just a month?” Asked Maito.

“Well I trained Sasuke to use Lee-kun's Taijutsu, because he had copied it with the Sharingan and had seen Lee-kun in action before he was able to master the style, though it was a lot of work.” Hatake said. Sakura raised an eyebrow, dubious that that was the entirety of the training. Likely, he was just waiting for the Uchiha to pull out something overly flashy to add to the Drama. “Naruto trained with Ebisu, and Sakura spent the month under Morino Ibiki.”

“According to Naruto, the closet pervert that was training him was beaten up by a super pervert so the super pervert had to train him instead. There were toads.” Sakura added helpfully. Hatake made a thoughtful humming noise.

“Really.” He murmured and her interest caught. Apparently the ‘super pervert’ was someone important.

“You trained under Morino Ibiki?” Maito asked, looking genuinely disturbed. “What was that *like*?” It was asked with the revolted curiosity of someone that knew they weren't going to like the answer but felt compelled to know anyway.

“My time was planned down to the minute.” Sakura said, her voice turning distant and face blank as though remembering The War. “Meals, bowel movements, sleep. I was only allowed to leave the T&I building for training purposes. My favourite lesson was called ‘Torture Resistance Training’. It was nice, the simplicity of thumbscrews and mind games.”

Maito had very aggressively blanched, watching her with a combination of deep concern and wariness. It was an expression she was growing used to seeing on the shinobi around her.

“Sounds like you had fun.” Hatake said, eye smiling over his shoulder at her. She beamed back.

“Yep!” She said gleefully, the wariness in Maito’s expression increased. She put as much childlike enthusiasm into her words as possible. “Ibiki-oji-san taught me three different ways to flay someone without killing them!”

Maito started sweating. Hatake made no audible sound, but Sakura could feel the rumbling of his laughter through his back.

“What is that?!” Uzumaki cried, derailing further conversation and drawing attention back to the fight.

The fight where Uchiha Sasuke was using what had to be the Chidori on a giant sand ball.

“A simple stab.” Said Maito. “But it is the Copy-nin Kakashi’s sole original technique. It is a technique specifically for assassination. The speed of the stab and the great amount of the chakra creates heightened flesh, because the chakra is concentrated in the hand and with the speed of the user you hear a sound like a thousand birds running towards you. Thus the technique is called Chidori.

“The technique relies on the stabbing speed that pushes the limits of the human body and the huge amount of chakra that is focused in one arm. That arm then becomes the blade of a sword that cuts anything.” Maito sighed. “What a truly ridiculous technique.”

“Like you can talk.” Hatake snarked.

“What is it like, having that much chakra to just throw around?” Sakura lamented softly. “Are you constantly vibrating out of your...”

It was faint, but the air was turning poisonous. A monstrous arm was

stretching towards Uchiha.

There was an enemy jinchūriki in the village.

A village wouldn't risk their prized weapon needlessly. There was only one reason they would expose them.

War.

She wasn't blind, she'd known the shinobi of the village were preparing for something to happen today, but she'd assumed it was on the lines of 'use the chūnin exams as a distraction for an attack' not 'use the chūnin exams as the *centre* of an attack'.

Sakura tapped Hatake's shoulder and he lowered her to the ground. She casually checked her weapons were in their correct places. Feathers flew in front of her eyes.

"Kai." She released the genjutsu, dropped her signature to nothing, hinged to look like the wall behind her and drew her sword in the same moment. There were nine enemy shinobi at the front of the stands. The Uchiha and the Suna-nin were gone. The Kage's were in a box on the roof. One of the Kage's was actually Orochimaru wearing their face.

Sakura felt intimately, horribly aware that she could very well die.

She smiled.

She put her back to the wall and watched Gai and Hatake decimate the forces. They moved together with the ease of those that knew each other inside and out, their attacks moving in synch and their styles complimenting the other perfectly.

Sakura would get to that level. She would not spend another brawl backed up against a wall, too weak to do anything but get in the way. She refused.

"Sakura! Nullify the genjutsu and wake up Shikamaru and Naruto." Hatake stood tall before her, broad shoulders splattered in vivid red and radiating power. "You four have an A rank mission."

Sakura did not think this was the correct time to hit puberty. Puberty did not agree.

Fuck.

Mass Murder and Boring Hang Ons

Chapter Summary

Sakura faces her most devastating and horrifying threat yet, PUBERTY.

There's also a war, so that's pretty cool.

"Sasuke is in pursuit of Gaara and the others from the Sand. Sakura, you're to nullify the genjutsu on Naruto and Shikamaru and the four of you will track down Sasuke."

"Four?" Sakura asked, endlessly thankful the henge covered the burning flush on her cheeks.

"Summoning no Jutsu!" He used the back of a dead body to perform the seals. A puff of smoke and a burst of sound indicating the successful summoning. Standing delicately on top of the corpse was now a tiny, adorable, hideous pug. It somehow projected an air of regal pride even as it exuded the same air of exhausted laziness as its summoner.

"This guy, Pakkun, will be able to track Sasuke down by his scent." Said Hatake. The pug stared. Sakura stared back. She dropped the henge.

Some things were more important than dignity.

"It's an honour, Pakkun." She said seriously, a hand held over her heart. The summon radiated smug satisfaction.

"Hehe, looks like you got a smart one, eh Kakashi?" The pug chuckled. Hatake sighed.

"Just get to work."

She made her way to where the Uzumaki and the Nara were lying. A hand sign and the Uzumaki was waking, but she simply glared at the Nara. She poked him. Pakkun bit his ankle.

The pug was quickly worming its way into her cold, empty heart.

"You heard the man, Nara." She said.

“Bah! I refuse! Who cares about Sasuke!” Nara grumbled, only to be once again bitten by the pug.

“Basically the entire village.” She deadpanned.

“What’s going on?” Uzumaki asked. She looked over at him only to freeze at the sight of Maito punching a sound-nin through a concrete wall.

Sakura locked up in pure terror. She didn’t move. Didn’t breath. Didn’t even dare to blink as the man straightened into a ‘heroic’ pose. Thick muscles rippling under green spandex and vivid splatters of red over his face and knuckles.

One second.

One and a half.

Two.

Nothing.

Sakura relaxed abruptly. A sigh of sheer relief leaving her as not even a whiff of hormones appeared. She was not inexplicably attracted to the man.

This body may be attracted to males (admittedly a surprise after sixty three years of Tristan finding his same gender just a little gross, even if- statistically speaking- she probably should have expected it) but at least it didn’t have completely terrible taste.

She eyed Hatake, noting a subsequent increase in the heat of her cheeks and a not insignificant speeding of her pulse.

Mostly.

“Now I’ll restate your mission! Once you’ve heard it, escape through that hole. Chase after Sasuke, join up with him and stop him. Then, take him away to a safe location.” Hatake ordered, a husky note to his voice that sent-

God dammit puberty!

“What happened to Sasuke?!” Uzumaki yelled.

“I’ll explain as we go!” Sakura said; deciding just to fuck it, run away from her problems, grab the orange ball and take a running jump out

of the hole. A distant part of her lizard brain registered Pakkun clinging to the back of her dress with his teeth and the Nara jumping after them.

They leapt through the trees, the pug taking point as Sakura gave the other two a run down.

“Suna and Sound have launched a joint attack on Konoha, the spectators of the chūnin exam finals were put under a mass, sleep-inducing genjutsu as they attacked. Gaara freaked the fuck out after he was hurt by Sasuke and was then taken- presumably to somewhere safe- by his siblings. Sasuke went after them. We are going after Sasuke.”

“I gotcha! So that’s what’s been going on.” Uzumaki said. “Sasuke’s getting ahead of himself.”

“So! Why am I being assigned out like this?” Complained the Nara. “It’s a shittin’ chore!”

“Too bad, it’s what you get for being competent!” Sakura replied. “Now what’s the plan, team leader?” She asked the Nara and he scowled.

“This way!” Pakkun growled, shifting directions suddenly. Sakura followed with a grimace. “Pick up the pace! From behind, two squads with eight, no... one more, nine men are chasing us!”

“Already? Man you’ve got to be kidding me!” Said the Nara.

“Don’t look as if they’ve got a fix on our true position yet but they’re closing in on us quickly while on the lookout for any surprise attacks.”

“Shit! They’re probably all chūnin level, if they catch with us, we’ll be annihilated!”

“SHIT! Well if that’s the case then shall we ambush ‘em and do ‘em?!”

“We’d certainly have a great advantage if we were to ambush them! Even if they’re twice our number so long as we could surprise them...”

“It’s no use. They’re subordinates of Orochimaru, former Konoha shinobi, you know.” Interjected Pakkun.

“Fuck, I thought we might have been able to pull it off, but I guess not then.” Nara said.

“What does that mean?” Uzumaki asked.

“If they’re former Konoha shinobi then they’re probably extremely familiar with the geography of the land and have practiced mock combat for this battle. Even with that, the ambush might still be advantageous to us but there’s too many unknown factors.” Nara explained. “To begin with, the enemy’s a shinobi squad that’s been picked for this plan, where as we have an idiot, an injured kunoichi, a dog, and the best guy at running away, me!”

Sakura’s mind was whirling, scenario after scenario forming and melting and reforming behind her eyes.

“After that analysis, there’s only one thing we can do now. We need to create a diversion that looks as if we are going to ambush them. One of us will have to remain behind and delay them by faking an ambush.”

“A decoy.” Sakura said, her voice flat as she thought.

“That’s right, if they’re stalled they won’t be able to locate the remaining three. If we do this right we’ll be able to throw off the trackers, but the one who stays behind will probably die.” Nara said, his tone grim.

“No.” Sakura interrupted, the Nara opened his mouth to argue but she barrelled on. “Triple bluff. You set up a fake ambush posing as an actual ambush whilst I go full stealth and actually ambush the fake ambush.”

He paused, frowned. “They’ll be looking out for something like that, the ninth member is likely specifically set up to prevent those sorts of attacks.”

“Quadruple bluff, clone fake ambushing the fake ambush so I can ambush the ninth and then ambush the fake ambush.” She said, Uzumaki grew increasingly confused looking whilst the Nara’s brows furrowed in thought.

“You would be better spent at the fight.” Nara argued.

“I don’t have the chakra reserves to deal with Gaara.” She countered. “After the initial attack I’d just be a liability.”

“And just Naruto won’t?!”

“He’ll be with Sasuke. They can win.” His voice portrayed absolute confidence. The preteen’s panicked expression lessened in response to her calm.

“Alright.” He nodded, though he looked a little pale. “Quadruple bluff.” Nara and Sakura stopped, Uzumaki and Pakkun following a half second after.

“I don’t really understand but I’ll be depending on you guys!” Uzumaki cried. Sakura turned to him, a serious expression on her face.

“Naruto. If you and Sasuke work together, I am absolutely sure you two could achieve anything.” She said. He nodded once, face filled with DETERMINATION, before turning and jumping through the trees.

Sakura ran her hands through the signs for a water clone. Henged mottled, erased her signature and moved into the very top of the leafy branches. Her clone followed behind the Nara- who was laying a false trail of ‘paw prints’ with a bundle of sticks alongside his own steps- and somewhat dampened its signature. It made a show of being stealthy at the level of a moderately competent genin. Not enough to fool a chūnin looking out for sneak attacks, but enough to make said chūnin believe they were sincerely trying. Nara placed a trail until he came upon a clearing and stopped at the far edge of it, an unusually thick copse of trees to his right.

Sakura took the hint and her and her clone disappeared into the foliage, the clone perching behind a trunk and peering ‘sneakily’ around the wood whilst Sakura fitted herself above it and activated the transparency jutsu. She wouldn’t be able to move whilst she needed to stay hidden, but she would be virtually undetectable whilst it was active.

The group of enemy shinobi appeared- predictably eight of them- and approached Shikamaru from the front, immediately falling for his shadow trap. Likely, they just didn’t care. They expected the ninth to keep them safe.

Sakura watched as a stealthier shinobi appeared behind her clone, slapped a hand over its mouth and drove a blade through its chest. It dissolved to water at the injury but the real Sakura was already dropping. Her blade was already flying through his neck.

The body dropped, headless, and Sakura wasted no time in throwing herself towards the first of the eight, finding three already dead from kunai to the hearts. She sliced through two before a third figure

appeared, taking out the remaining three just as the shadow jutsu failed and Shikamaru fell to a knee.

“I finally caught up to you.” Asuma said, straightening with a cigarette hanging from his mouth.

Interestingly enough, despite the man’s conventionally good looks and ‘strong’ actions, Sakura felt no attraction to him. Was it because of his strange relationship with Yūhi? The lack of blood? Something to explore later.

“Asuma, why?” The Nara asked, voice shaky and weak with a mixture of shock and exhaustion. Sakura looked down at the kid and the hero worship on his face, suddenly hyper aware that for all his smarts he was only twelve. Had that been his first kill?

“You did good, guys, but for the time being you’re done.” Sarutobi said, almost entirely ignoring Sakura but including her in the stand down order. She pulled her lips back to expose her teeth and pointed her sword at the man.

“I am nowhere close to finished. Point me to where I can be of assistance or I will find somewhere myself.” She demanded and the jōnin frowned but in a way that was more considerate than patronising.

“How are your reserves?”

“Sixty eight percent.” She said, causing his eyebrows to rise. Whether from the significant amount left or the exact number she didn’t know.

“You good to get a medical shelter on your own?” He asked the Nara. The boy nodded. “Alright, get on.” He flicked his cigarette and crouched down in front of her, Sakura wasted no time in climbing on his back and sticking to his flak jacket with chakra. He nodded once at the Nara before they were flying through the trees, leagues faster than Sakura could have managed under her own power.

It wasn’t long before they reached a battle. Suna and Sound and Konoha all mixed together in a flurry of jutsus and attacks. The hot midday sun beat down on the scene relentlessly. Patches of bright summer flowers, strewn over the streets and crushed under foot, mixed in with vivid splashes of crimson. Exploded glass left spews of glittering mess and collapsed walls were screaming maws in the sides of buildings.

Sakura tapped the jōnin's shoulder once in warning before using him as a ladder and spring boarding from his shoulder over the fight, eyes flitting over the battlefield to identify places where her interference would be helpful. She sent out three strings and threw a chakra coated kunai into the air above her.

Her chakra caught four times in rapid succession, swapping with a body here, a pile of rubble there; never staying longer than a second or two in one place. Just long enough to leave a lightning infused wound on an enemy-nin- often debilitating, always distracting- before appearing in the next location. After three rapid attacks her chakra caught on the kunai in the air and she found herself falling, eyes flicking over the battle and three strings being sent out whilst she threw another coated kunai.

She repeated the process over and over again, always throwing the kunai to a different location- often the air, sometimes windows and the tops of buildings when she needed a breather- until the very last enemy-nin had dropped. She let herself fall harmlessly to the ground and assessed the situation.

Nineteen percent of her chakra left. Not a lot but not impossible to work around. A steadily bleeding wound on her thigh and a throbbing in her side coupled with an inability to breath deeply that suggested one of her cracked ribs had been exacerbated into a full on break. Almost every muscle was aching with overexertion. Six kunai, eleven shuriken, her chokutō available. Fifteen allies in her immediate vicinity. A lot of bodies. None of either were the Sarutobi. The position of the sun suggested the battle had taken a little over four hours.

It had seemed no longer than five minutes.

"Heya girly, thanks for the save back there!" Yelled an approaching man. He looked to be in his late twenties and fairly plain looking aside from being quite tall. His face had the familiarity of one she'd seen in a shinobi identification picture but had ultimately forgotten any details about because they were too boring. He was also the man she'd stopped from getting a kidney full of Naginata.

"No problem." She said, voice lacking any of the substance human voices typically had.

Was the pain in her cheeks bruises or a too-wide smile?

She worked on evening out her breathing from gasping and erratic to

just shallow. Locked the monster back into the box.

“The name’s Okomato Kousuke. Chūnin.” He held out a hand. She took it automatically, pumping it up and down. The movement was a bit too mechanical to be normal but it was significantly better than it would have been a minute ago and the man didn’t seem to mind. Shinobi were inherently familiar with the rush of a battle. The ache in her cheeks was becoming less strained by the passing minute.

“Haruno Sakura. Genin.” There was a little bubbling of life behind her words. She breathed out, relaxed her face completely, and then replaced it with a small, earnest-looking smile. “It’s good to meet you, senpai.”

He smiled, the expression showing far too many teeth. “I thought all the baby shinobi would be at the shelters, what were you doing to be thrown into this shit show?”

“I was taking the chūnin exams.” She deadpanned. His eyes glinted with recognition, then wariness.

“You’re one of Hatake’s.” He stated, a low simmering fear in his words. She added a notch to her ‘Hatake was threatening people to be nice to them behind their backs’ mental tally.

“That’s right.” She purred, smile too sharp and eyes too wide. She’d scented the blood in the water. “I don’t see any reason why I should tell him about you. Do you, Kousuke-senpai?”

The man paused for a couple of seconds before he laughed, a loud and boisterous sound that rang through the buildings. The monster thrashed angrily in its box, begging her to lash out in response to the insult. All wounded pride at the lack of *fear*.

Instead, Sakura kept her face neutral and her demeanour friendly. She wasn’t an *animal*. She didn’t need to use anything as graceless as fear to control people.

“What happens now?” She asked. “Do we go to another battle?”

“Eager, aren’t you.” He said.

“Konoha’s my village. I don’t like people touching my things.”

He set off laughing again, a delighted grin on his face.

“You probably didn’t notice, but the guy over there,” he pointed to a short, blonde haired man with half a hand missing. She had noticed him appearing during the battle but dismissed it as unimportant, apparently that had been a mistake. “Appeared about three quarters into the fight with news. The enemy forces have been pushed back, we were one of the last pockets still fighting. Everyone injured is to report to medical, everyone else to a shelter. The jōnin and ANBU will run a final sweep, but otherwise the village should be clear.”

“Ah.” She nodded. “To medical, then.”

“You and everyone else, girly.” He said and they begun hobbling (without the adrenaline to numb the pain, Sakura’s leg was causing a significant limp in her steps) in the direction of the centres. There was a grief-stricken aspect to his face that made her vaguely wonder who he was distracting himself from by talking to her.

She didn’t let him stew, and pulled him into a conversation, the man latching onto the out and gleefully launching into a tale about his neighbour’s cat. She morbidly wondered if the thing would be dead.

“Maa, Sakura-chan, this is not what I had in mind when I sent you after Sasuke.” A voice drawled from behind them. There was anger in the words that she easily identified as thinly veiled concern. He must have been worried she didn’t show up with the others. Sakura turned with a genuine smile on her face whilst the chūnin next to her jumped violently and cursed colourfully under his breath.

“Carry me to medical, sensei?” She asked, green eyes wide and pleading and her lips pouted slightly. Hatake sighed, scooped her up, and set off across the rooftops, leaving the chūnin behind without another word.

Thankfully, breathing just a touch deeper than was likely advisable with her injuries and feeling the threat of jagged bone in the side of her lung was an affective method of distracting her body from the subsequent burst of hormones.

“Who was that?” He asked, entirely unrepentant about just ignoring the chūnin but with a thread of something darker in his tone that suggested he might actually kill the dude if she reported him mistreating her. This whole invasion thing must have really been getting too him for Hatake to be so open about actually caring about any of his genin.

“I know he told me his name, but I honestly don’t remember.” She

said, lazily watching the blur of buildings pass them by.

“You know the name of almost everyone in the village.” His voice was disbelieving.

“I know the name of almost everyone *interesting* in the village.” She retorted and the lone eye blinked slowly.

“Not everyone important is interesting, Pinky.”

“Ah! But I find importance inherently interesting.”

Silver hair tipped in acknowledgement.

“Naruto and Sasuke?”

“They’ll be fine.” He said. “The Sandaime was killed by Orochimaru.”

She tensed. “Sensei.” She said, a warble of stress behind her words. He blinked down at her in apparent confusion. “Please tell me there’s a second Sannin miraculously in the village.”

“Ah, Jirayia-sama was Naruto’s ‘super pervert’ and he appeared in the battle.” He said and she sighed in relief, causing his visible eyebrow to raise critically.

“Kakashi.” She said, her voice and face deadpan. “Without the Sannin who do you think would be made Kage? Who in the village would be strong enough and was also trained by a previous Hokage?”

(It had been one of her favourite thought exercises for years before she actually met Hatake. It was a lot less interesting to ponder the changes to the village if the Hokage died once she realised just how committed Hatake was to his ‘quirks’.)

He blanched and a visible grimace appeared under the mask. “Never. Say something so horrible to me again.”

She snorted and he landed in front of a medical centre- noticeably not the closest but one of the ones mostly likely to be the quietest, meaning she would actually get reasonable treatment despite the relative non-severity of her injuries- set her down, pat her once on the head, and promptly disappeared.

Sakura huffed and went inside.

The next day she found out that Kabuto had disappeared from the cells in T&I.

-

Sakura stood in the centre of her living room. Head tilted as she eyed the surrounding furniture and knick knacks.

On the kitchen bench behind her there were containers of leftovers from the lunch with Team Seven, two small porcelain urns filled with ashes and a stack of legal documents including the deed to the house, freshly signed in her name.

It was three days since the village had been invaded. Two days since she'd found out her parents were dead. They'd died fighting Suna shinobi in the chūnin exam arena.

She wasn't in mourning. She was capable of feeling love, but it was a twisted, possessive thing. More based in jealousy and obsession than kindness. Controllable. She hadn't loved them. They had been her parents, but they hadn't been *hers*.

Tristan had made that mistake. Had gotten attached to the warmth and the happiness and the love and acceptance both sets of their parents had offered so readily. He'd been a child without a concept of death and old age, so he'd sliced a home for his parents deep in his greedy, little heart. The loss of them had *ached*.

She'd known better this time. She'd understood that her parent's would inevitably die before her. She'd enjoyed her time with them, but she hadn't gotten attached.

So no, she didn't mourn, but she still felt strange standing in her own home.

It was quiet in a way she'd never dealt with before. Tristan had gone from living with his parents and five siblings to sharing an apartment with two friends. One of those friends had turned into his wife and they'd quite quickly had three children after buying a house together. They'd both experienced periods of being on their own, her parent's had spent the past two months on holidays, but this was the first time she'd lived in a space knowing no one else was coming.

Knowing it was *hers* and hers alone.

She tilted her head and brought out a pack of garbage bags. She had

some time before the shops closed. Sakura had always had a preference for blue walls.

The Maddening Massacre

Chapter Summary

In which Sakura threatens a great number of people, her patriotism hits an all time low and she actually wears something just slightly more fashionable than the T&I uniform.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hey Naruto!” Sakura said, waving at the Uzumaki as she entered the ramen stand.

“Sakura-chan, what are you doing here?” The blonde asked, mouth full of noodles. “And what are you wearing?!” He looked at the grey jacket and pants in surprise and she smiled.

“Ah, I’m shadowing Ibiki-oji-san today. This is the T&I uniform, no one ever believes I’m with him if I wear my normal outfit.” She said before turning to the old man behind the counter and sliding a handful of bills to him. “Hi Teuchi-san, can I please get a bowl of miso and another of whatever Naruto wants for him.”

The boy turned to her, eyes glistening with unshed tears and a beaming smile on his face. “Sakura-chan!” He sniffed. “Is this a dat-”

“No.” She said and he wilted. “It’s a good luck bowl for the future hokage.” At that he got even more teary eyed, wrapping her in a hug and balling until he was distracted by the fresh bowls of ramen the old man slid in front of them. She was just finishing her bowl (Uzumaki had moved onto yet another one, babbling all the while) when a mane of white hair poked its way into the stall.

“AH! So there you are!” The man said, his booming voice filling the small space.

“Hah! It’s the pervert sennin!!!” Uzumaki yelled, mouth still full of noodles. The Sannin begun to puff in offence before his eyes strayed to Sakura and he leaned towards Uzumaki with a salacious grin, jabbing the kid repeatedly with an elbow.

“Hey, Naruto, is this your girlfrie-”

“No.” She said and the man wilted. Sakura was hit with the sudden and horrifying realisation that he was just an older Naruto. “I’m Naruto’s teammate, Haruno Sakura. It’s an honour to meet you Jiraiya-sama.” She greeted, holding out a hand and smiling angelically instead of letting any of the realisation show on her face.

“It’s always a pleasure to meet such an intelligent kid!” Jiraiya said, clutching her hand with two of her own and shaking it enthusiastically.

“Mhm, Naruto was totally right about you!” She nodded, her face guileless.

His hands stopped and he levelled her with a suspicious look. “And what, exactly, has Naruto told you?”

“Just that you’re a perverted old weirdo with a poor taste in summons.” She kept her voice childish and her smile blinding.

“OI!” The Sannin roared, pointing angrily at her, but she ignored him and turned to the Uzumaki.

“I’ve got to get back to Ibiki-oji-san.” She poured as much fondness as possible into the moniker as possible. The Sannin abruptly stopped complaining to eye her T&I uniform. She put on a serious expression. “But make sure you stay safe, if you got hurt I’d have to track down whoever was meant to be protecting you and feed them their own manhood.”

“Haha! Don’t worry about me, Sakura-chan, it’s not like I’m going anywhere!” The Uzumaki proclaimed. She smiled and walked out of the ramen stand, pausing halfway out the exit to look back and enjoy the way the Sannin had paled and was shying away from her.

“See you Naruto, Teuchi-san,” She said with a bright expression before lowering her voice to a purr and eyeing the white haired man dangerously. “Jiraiya-sama.”

The man grimaced back at her. She laughed as she left.

-

“Knock, knock.” She said cheerily, opening the door to three stressed looking jōnin and Hatake’s still form on the bed. She held up the bundle of forms she was carrying against her chest. “Ibiki-oji-san” she enjoyed the way Maito visibly became more wary of her, “sent me to

collect your reports on the incident.”

She passed a bundle of papers, a clipboard and a pen to each jōnin, cleared the papers off the desk, dragged it closer to Hatake, and perched herself on top. She looked up to the watching jōnin and raised her eyebrows.

“Well?” She waved at them. “Go on.” The Sarutobi and Maito complied, beginning filling in the reports, but Yūhi was looking at her with a furrowed brows.

“Isn’t this... above your clearance level?” She asked, her voice gentle like talking to a particularly stupid child.

“No.” Sakura deadpanned, inspecting the nails of one hand.

“But-” She started.

“Yūhi-san,” Sakura started, voice dangerously sweet. “I would like to remind you that my sensei is currently unresponsive,” She waved a hand at Hatake and Yūhi’s face turned troubled, “one of my teammates is being targeted by a pair of homicidal madmen, the village is still in chaos from the attack, and I’ve spent all day as the direct support for the head of an extremely understaffed T&I. Outside of a twenty minutes for lunch, this is the closest I’ve had to a break since well before sunrise, and I’m spending it next to the sick bed of someone I care about.”

She leaned forward and let the full force of the day’s frustrations show on her face, leaking a potent level of killing intent into the air. “Do. Not. Test. Me.” Her voice was a snarl.

The Sarutobi handed his report to her and she began going through the information.

(If Morino had wanted her to just collect the reports and hand them in untouched he’d have sent a random courier genin rather than someone he described as ‘passably competent’. Her job was to summarise what was relevant into a verbal report so he didn’t have to look away from his other mountains of work as he learnt what had happened.)

“You’re just a genin! You can’t order us around!” Yūhi shrieked, an angry expression twisting her face.

“Kurenai.” Sarutobi said, but she ignored him, opening her mouth to

continue.

“Actually, I’m currently acting as Morino Ibiki’s personal assistant, which gives me the ability to file disciplinary slips for anyone of an A + clearance or lower.” Sakura said in a monotone, focused on the report in her hands. Yūhi still had a mulish expression on her face but she wisely stopped speaking and went to work.

Maito handed over his finished report with a gleaming smile. “Congratulations, Morino-san must value you highly to put you in such a sort after position.”

She nodded but didn’t otherwise reply. Instead, she was frowning down at the reports. Her mind whirling as she tried to fit what she knew of Uchiha Itachi in with this new information.

It didn’t fit.

Yūhi handed in her report and Sakura’s frown only deepened.

She was vaguely aware of conversation happening around her but she couldn’t find it within herself to pay attention, even when the Uchiha entered the room. Her mind too preoccupied with the current puzzle. She knew one thing for certain.

Every jōnin in this room should be dead.

Her eyes slid to the disturbingly still form of Hatake. Her mouth pinched.

Then an idiot was bursting in, the Uchiha was running and Maito- after far too long of a hesitation- was chasing after him. She ran her mind through the possibilities and sighed.

She would just get in the way.

She made a mental note to write up Yamashiro Aoba for screaming about classified information in an unsecured area, and sent a final glance at Hatake. She left, waving good bye to the other jōnin.

Worked on ignoring the acidic boil of anger in her gut.

Sakura had a village to help run.

-

Sakura spent the following weeks once again living out of T&I. With

Hatake indisposed, Morino had gleefully monopolised her time, taking advantage of her high clearance level (An advantage she'd gained after the month of training he'd put her through. Apparently the head of T&I vouching for her and giving evidence of just how thorough his torture resistance training had been was enough to get her a clearance on par with most council members.) and general competence but her low ranking as a genin preventing her from getting sucked into the village's high mission demand after the losses of the invasion. Her days were a blur of training, paper work and running errands. Her nights she spent working until her eyes blurred deep in archives, reading everything and anything she could get her hands on related to Uchiha Itachi and the massacre.

It just didn't make *sense*.

Sakura's only breaks were during Morino-enforced lunch breaks. Usually during days where she'd begin to look particularly pale and drawn, he'd physically throw her out of the T&I building and order her to splurge on good food and visit some friends. Of course the man worded it differently ("You're stinking the fucking place up, Haruno!") but she'd gotten good at reading between the lines.

Sakura, having no real friends outside of her team and Shiranui (who was either working, sleeping or out of the village thanks to their crippled forces), would get a box of takeaway, some flowers and spend an hour or two sitting next to Hatake's or the Uchiha's bedside, playing with her nature releases.

She knew she didn't have the reserves (and probably wouldn't ever have them) to perform the Chidori, not to mention not having the Sharingan to really master it, but damn it all if that was going to stop her from putting her hands through people's ribcages.

She'd gotten to the point where she could manifest pure elemental chakra above her hands, just little streaks of lighting and bursts of water, and she felt close to figuring out how to reabsorb the lightning chakra, effectively turning herself into a giant circuit and getting some of the benefits of the Chidori with none of the drain on her reserves.

It was during this messing around that she had her biggest break through.

She'd been alternating between releasing water chakra and lighting chakra, testing how quickly she could switch between the two, when instead of a burst of electricity or a spray of water she instead got a

thick, bright blue beam that shuddered and pulsed over her palm before sputtering out into nothingness.

She stared.

She tried it again, this time purposely trying to produce both lightning and water chakra at the same time. It worked. A large, almost dripping ring of bright, electrical blue pulsed around her hand. She tried to move it and the ring shifted and spun almost instinctively.

It was far, far easier than using water or lightning had ever been.

Sakura smiled.

“Sensei.” She told Hatake’s still form. “I don’t think I’m a lightning and a water type, I think I’m something in between.”

She spent the rest of her lunch break experimenting with the blue gloop. If she had a stupid grin on her face and significantly lower chakra levels afterwards, well, Morino only looked a little smug about it.

-

Sakura was at a crossroads.

She stared at the pile of files in front of her, arms crossed and legs bouncing under the table.

She’d gone as far as she could with legal and only mildly illegal means. If she wanted to figure out what actually happened with the massacre, she would have to start breaking into some seriously high level vaults.

She had found enough to know there was a conspiracy. To see the patterns in strange missions and a butchered shinobi record to know that Uchiha Itachi did not just randomly snap and murder his entire clan. To see the pattern of discontent being purposely sewed in the village. Good shinobi given terrible missions just because of their clan name. Intelligence files missing. Rumours spread. Psychological reports altered.

She *could* do everything in her power to get to the bottom of it.

But, at the end of the day, Sakura was nothing but a clanless orphan. Sure she had great prospects, a fantastic jōnin sensei and important

teammates, but ultimately that just gave her a lot of potential.

Right now, she could be spirited away the moment someone didn't like where she was digging.

...She made a mental note to research better protections for her house.

On the one hand, she wasn't selfless or patriotic enough to put her life on the line for the sake of answers, on the other hand leaving a level of corruption this big- something that had apparently sacrificed an entire *clan* for unclear aims- to fester had a pretty high chance of coming back to bite her in the ass later.

Sakura pushed a harsh breath of air out of her nose and packed away the files. She had to stop.

-

"Hey Shikamaru!" Sakura called, the Nara turning to look at her with a grimace on his face.

"Sakura." He said, tone flat. The older version standing next to him dug and elbow into his ribs. "How wonderful it is to see you again." He deadpanned and she pouted before turning to the older version with a smile.

"I'm Haruno Sakura, it's a pleasure to meet you properly, Nara-sama." She said with a small bow.

"Just call me Shikaku, all that Sama nonsense is too troublesome." Older Version drawled, scratching a stubby jawline. "You're the kid that follows Ibiki around, right?" They begun walking away from the administrative office as a group, the Nara attempting to put Older Version between them but the man's hand on the kid's shoulder purposefully steering him next to her and preventing it.

"Yep, since Kakashi-sensei is in the hospital I've been shadowing Ibiki-oji-san for the past month." She replied and he frowned.

"I was sorry to hear about Kakashi." Older Version said, more than slightly awkward.

"Thank you, Shikaku-san." She replied before turning a teasing grin on the Nara. "So, Shikamaru, how does it feel to be officially 'chūnin material'?" She asked and he scowled.

“Troublesome.” He said.

“It’s what you get for being competent.” She said. “Are you going to be working under Shikaku-san?”

“Not until I have more experience.”

“Well T&I would love to have you,” Her grin turned sly. “You know, we hold a monthly shoji tournament.”

His eyes narrowed, but there was a glimmer of interest in their depths. “Too troublesome.” His tone was slightly disbelieving.

“Mhm, you would think so, but everyone there gets really serious about it.” She said, nodding as she did. “Of course that’s mostly due to the gambling and copious amounts of drinking, but the end result is still the same. Anko-nee-san is actually really scary into it.”

“You people should be kept in cages.” He muttered moodily. Sakura started laughing, high pitched and delighted. He quirked an incredulous eyebrow at her.

“You’ll find out when you’re older.” She unhelpfully explained. The older version went a little pink. (She should not have gone into The Room.) A ball of orange caught her eye. “Hey, Naruto!” She called. “What are you doing here?”

“I was just about to ask you the same thing!” The Uzumaki said, peering suspiciously at the three of them “What are you doing with this lazy idiot? The only building around here is the ninja administration.”

“Just some paperwork, we were promoted to chūnin.” She said, ignoring the Nara’s embarrassed mutterings.

“That’s great Sakura-chan!” He beamed at her before a flash of jealousy crossed his face. “Did Sasuke...?”

“We were the only two promoted to chūnin.”

“Ah, well that’s great, you totally deserve it Sakura-chan!” He said earnestly and though she smiled back she was inwardly extremely confused. Was it because she was a girl? Was his jealousy exclusively towards the Uchiha? But even as she watched he pouted enviously at the Nara, though none of the same sentiment was directed at her. Was it because she was his teammate and entirely nice to him?

The Nara, who had been paying more attention to the adult's conversation, chose that moment to interrupt.

"Who's the young woman with the big attitude?" He asked, an annoyed expression on his face and a hand over his mouth as if that would magically make the sound stop carrying.

"She's the new hokage." Uzumaki copied the Nara's posture, and seemed entirely oblivious to the way the words were shattering his worldview. "Oh, and although she looks young, she's really fifty."

The groups moved to split and Sakura took up position next to the Uzumaki. "See you next time, Shikamaru." She waved.

"Hey Shikamaru, let's meet up later, alright? I'll show you my cool new move!" Uzumaki said. "See ya!"

They left the Nara's behind.

(Sakura didn't know but the pair followed the interaction with an intense conversation about women, during which the younger version vehemently denied that she was even human, and thus couldn't be classified as a female.)

"So Naruto," She started, slinging an arm over the bouncing blonde's shoulder. "You're not hurt at all, the old pervert didn't... take advantage of you?"

The white haired Sannin scowled and started loudly insulting her, which set off the blonde Sannin and ended in them shaking each other angrily in the middle of the hallway. Sakura ignored them.

"Nope!" He said. "But I totally learned this awesome new jutsu and there were these bad guys and I blew them away like...!"

They headed to the hospital to a soundtrack of the Uzumaki's excited rambling, Sakura making 'oohs' and 'ahs' at the right moments. She would have figured this would be annoying to the others, but the Senju had a wistfully fond expression on her face the whole time instead, the white haired Sannin had disappeared after being punched through a wall and the brunette looked too stressed to be aware of her surroundings.

They entered the Uchiha's room and the Uzumaki fell into a solemn silence at the sight of the kid. The Senju strolled purposefully into the room- after eyeing the plushy, black cat Sakura had left at the end of

his bed- her hand coming to rest on the Uchiha's forehead and glowing a medical green.

"He'll be alright, she's a great doctor." Uzumaki said. Sakura gave him a comforting smile and a pat on the shoulder.

"Of course she is, you went and got her after all." At that he brightened and watched as the Senju removed her hand from the Uchiha's forehead and the raven haired kid blinked himself awake. The Uzumaki looked between him and the Senju with a conflicted expression on his face.

"You look after Sasuke and I'll make sure Kakashi-sensei is okay, alright?" Sakura said softly and the blonde nodded, throwing himself towards the Uchiha. Sakura followed the Senju and her brown haired follower out of the room. "Ah! I'm Haruno Sakura, I'm sorry for not introducing myself earlier, I got kind of swept up in Naruto's enthusiasm." She said, affecting a sheepish expression.

"Hah! Don't worry about it kid!" The Senju laughed, clapping her on the back and sending her stumbling in a ridiculous show of strength. "I'm Tsunade, your new hokage, and this is Shizune, my apprentice."

"It's wonderful to meet you." She said. "Is it true you can punch through mountains?" Sakura's eyes sparkled with excitement. The Senju chuckled.

"It is, though it takes near perfect chakra control." The Senju said as she made her way into Hatake's room.

Sakura felt her interest catch. A plan line into place. She eyed the tall blonde's glowing green hand on Hatake's head. It would have to wait. She took a seat next to Matio, nodding to the man she'd built up somewhat of a camaraderie with- even if he'd never quite gotten over his wariness of her- after weeks of often sitting by the same bedside.

Hatake woke up in an impressively smooth move to a slumped seated position and a general aura of gloom. A little of the acidic anger in her gut relaxed at the sight.

"Humph, you were beaten by only two enemies?" The Senju teased, Hatake turned to look at her with a lone open eye, dark circles standing out in sharp relief against too pale skin. "I thought you were a genius."

A progressively more and more agitated Maito finally sprung to his

feet, poking the Senju towards the door. "Forget about this idiot! Please take a look at my student Lee!!" He cried, shepherding the blonde and her assistant out of the room. Sakura watched them go with a bemused smile. When she turned back Hatake was looking at her with a tired expression on his face.

"It's good to see you up, sensei." She smiled genuinely at the man. He blinked before sliding his open eye to the pile of plushies at the foot of his bed. Her smile widened. "I got bored of bringing flowers."

He raised an eyebrow at her, looking back and forth between the eight, disturbingly accurate ninken plushies and her.

"Once Gai-san figured out what I was doing he insisted on hand sewing their outfits."

"Aah." Hatake nodded. His voice gravelly with disuse. "How long was I out?"

"Almost two months." She replied and he gained a pained expression on his face.

"The others?"

"Sasuke chased after Naruto when he heard about what happened." She said and the man visibly wilted. "He encountered Itachi and had since been entirely unresponsive." The 'like you' hung unsaid at the bar of her throat. Sakura would *enjoy* ripping Itachi's pretty little eyes out if she ever got the chance. "Tsunade-sama woke him up successfully before coming here. As I understand it, Naruto was involved both in the fight against Itachi and Hoshigaki as well as a fight against Orochimaru, but sustained no lasting injuries. He's with Sasuke at the moment."

"And you?" He rasped, Sakura tilted her head.

"I'm fine?" She asked, genuinely perplexed by the question.

"You look exhausted."

"Ah, well." She sighed. "With you out of commission Ibiki made me his personal assistant. As there's been no Hokage and our forces have halved, the man's one of the three people currently holding the village together." She grimaced. "I don't think I've slept more than four hours in one night since before the chūnin exams." A hand landed on her head, tiredly ruffling her hair. Tension she hadn't even been aware

of in her spine melted out of her at the contact.

“Maa, I’m awake now Sakura-chan, you should go get some rest.” He drawled, swinging himself out of bed and moving over to the small cupboard in the corner of the room.

“Should you already be moving around, Kakashi-sensei?” She asked dubiously. He eye-smiled over his shoulder.

“What the medic’s don’t know won’t hurt them.” He said and pulled his flak jacket over his shoulders. “And my cute little genin wouldn’t betray my trust by telling them, would she?” He affected a mock hurt expression as he pulled on his gloves. Her grin turned sly.

“Is there a genin here, I didn’t realise?” She asked with exaggerated confusion. A newly gloved hand patted her head.

“Congratulations, Sakura.” Hatake said seriously. “You’ve earned it.” He paused for a second. “Did anyone else...?”

“Just me and Shikamaru.” She said and his eye smile became smug. She *knew* the man was thinking about Kohona’s Green Beast. He adjusted his forehead protector and tucked the collection of plushies under his arms.

“Meet in Sasuke’s room for a team meeting tomorrow at eleven.” He said, before shunshining away.

Sakura glanced towards the door, considered going back to the Uchiha’s room before yawning widely and figuring Hatake was right.

She headed to her house, ignored the general covering of dust and flopped into bed.

-

The next day she spent the morning running paperwork back and forth between T&I and the new Hokage’s office (wearing practical shinobi black and her brand new chūnin flak jacket in celebration), the blonde woman appearing deeper and deeper in paperwork-driven despair with every pile.

Amongst the piles she slipped in an anonymous, colour-coded, labelled and systematically itemised binder full of her findings about the Uchiha massacre, freshly sealed to only open with the Senju’s chakra signature, meaning only the Hokage, Sakura, and maybe

Orochimaru could see what was inside.

Once she was thrown out of the building, (“I can’t afford a fucking chūnin, Haruno!”) she made her way to the hospital, stopping for an order of fresh meat buns on the way. She arrived at one thirty, a solid half an hour before Hatake would bother to show up.

“Hi, Sasuke.” She said, slipping into the stark room and dragging a stool next to the brooding boy’s bed. “I brought lunch!” She said cheerily, waving the box of meat buns before him, only for it to be knocked out of her hands. The boy shot her a glare before turning to brood out of the window. Her eyebrows were in her hairline, staring incredulously at the ruined buns. She knew the Uchiha would be moody, but this was... bad.

The Uzumaki strolled in, the Uchiha turned to give him a truly poisonous glare.

Her eyes narrowed. That wasn’t a very Uchiha’y expression.

...Was it the mark?

“Why are you staring at me like that?” The blonde asked, his body language defensive. Irritation buzzed in the back of Sakura’s head.

“Hey, Naruto.” The Uchiha said, voice full of barely controlled anger, as he pushed himself to standing.

“Wha-what?”

“Fight me.” Uchiha demanded, fists clenched and teeth gritted. “NOW!”

“What are you babbling about? you’re still recovering.”

“SHUT UP AND FIGHT ME!” The Uchiha roared, eyes bleeding red in a dizzying spin. “You thought you helped me?” His tone was mocking, acidic. “That foolish fifth Hokage or whatever, butting into other people’s business.”

“What?!” The Uzumaki’s race reddened with anger.

“Sasuke, Naruto, stop it.” Sakura said, admittedly halfheartedly. They both ignored her.

“Well then, I was thinking about it to.” Uzumaki spat.

“Come with me.” The Uchiha turned and walked out the door, smashing a meat bun underfoot as he went, the Uzumaki hot on his heels. Sakura mourned the food for a moment before following.

Maybe beating each other half to death would do them some good.

She trailed them up to the roof, balancing on top of a corner of the fence to watch the pair.

“Hah!” Said Uzumaki.

“What’s so funny?!”

“Funny? No. I’m overjoyed actually. To think, how I can finally beat you.”

“What did you say? Stop blabbering you loser!”

“I’m no longer the loser you once knew me as. I’ve changed!”

“You dimwit idiot, what are you so full of yourself for, huh?!”

“Eh, what are you losing your cool for? That’s so unlike you. What?! Are you afraid now that you challenged me to a fight, huh? Sasuke?”

“Shut up and fight!”

“Before we start, you better put on your Konoha hitai-ate.”

“I don’t need something like that.”

“JUST DO IT!” Uzumaki yelled and Sakura tilted her head. Was he actually worried about Uchiha and wanted him to reaffirm his loyalties? Surprisingly perceptive.

“You won’t lay a finger on me, let alone my forehead.”

“No! What I’m saying is this is a symbol, that we fight as equal Konoha shinobi!”

“That’s why I say your full of yourself! You think you’re on par with me?!” Uchiha spat, essentially telling the blonde he didn’t give a shit about Konoha, though Sakura didn’t think that the Uchiha realised that. She watched the perceptiveness of the Uzumaki melt away into pure rage.

“Of course I do! In fact, I’ve never thought of myself as inferior to you,

not even once!”

“You’re pissing me off!!”

“That’s because you’re still weak, Sasuke-CHAN!”

They met in screams of anger. Both doing their best to beat the shit out of the other. Uzumaki used shadow clones. Uchiha used the giant fireball.

The flames died away to show two Uzumaki’s, a ball of pure chakra gathering in one of their hands. Sakura’s eyes widened. A thousand birds started chirping.

They were trying to kill each other. These fucking children were doing their best to fucking murder one other. One of whom had gotten their Sharingan and used it to pull the other out of harms way, taking potentially lethal hits in return, and the other who’d been unable to kill an enemy-nin after befriending them for five minutes beforehand.

How the fuck had things ended up like this?

Sakura didn’t intervene. She wasn’t attached enough to either of them to risk a ball of death or an A-rank assassination jutsu. They were both immature, arrogant and generally just acted like twelve year old boys. She could see herself getting there, could see the kinds of people they’d become when they matured. She could see a lot of potential.

She prepared herself to see that potential die on the roof of a hospital.

Fortunately for the boys, Hatake appeared just in time and threw them both into a water tank. She eyed the massive explosion in one and giant hole in the other.

“Hey! You two!” Hatake yelled. “What are you doing on the roof of the hospital?!” He turned to concentrate on the Uchiha so Sakura threw a coated kunai at the Uzumaki and swapped with it just in time to land behind the crouching boy.

She looked down at him dispassionately. He looked up at her, expression seething.

“I don’t know what that jutsu was,” She said, her voice dangerously flat. “But that would have killed Sasuke.”

The anger on his face stuttered slightly. He pushed to standing and she

leaned in with wide, serious eyes. “Is that what you wanted? To see him as nothing more than a smear of guts on the pavement?”

“What? No?! It wouldn’t ha-”

She grabbed him by the collar and dragged him to look at the back of the water tank. The metal warped and exploded outwards from the sheer force of the jutsu.

“What would that have done to a fragile thirteen year old?” She asked. Uzumaki had frozen, staring wide eyed at the destruction. She pat him on the head once and left him to it, hopping down to grab her kunai.

She waved absently over her shoulder at the pair of jōnin as she jumped off the roof, intent on getting something for lunch- again- and going to see if Shiranui was somewhere she could bother him.

Sure, she’d given the Uzumaki a kick up the ass, but she wasn’t one of the ones who taught immature, preteen boys those levels of techniques. They could deal with the fallout of that decision.

Chapter End Notes

Hating Kurenai is like hating a super bratty five year old. You know that at this point their behaviour is more the fault of their parents (in Kurenai's case Kishimoto's blatant sexism and greater problems embedded into the very fabric of otaku and Japanese culture) and taking shots at the five year old is just cheap, but they're just so annoying. I can't help it. I kept writing her in a scene and then she'd open her mouth and turn into such an entitled piece of shit.

I tried to make her a decent character. I swear. But no matter what I tired Kurenai was just the fucking worst.

The Hypocritical Defector

Chapter Summary

Sakura thinks she's turning out to be quite good at this wisdom sharing thing. It helps that she enjoys it. Something about destroying the innocence of children really tickles the sadistic portions of her brain.

Sakura sat on a wooden bench, a half eaten stick of dango in her mouth and the transparency jutsu activated.

The raven haired boy didn't notice her as he walked past. The jutsu dropped.

"Sasuke-kun." She crooned and he froze, whipping to look over his shoulder at her.

"Why are you here in the middle of the night?" He asked, glaring poisonously.

"I knew that you'd come this way, if you were going to leave." She smiled slyly. "You're really, very predictable."

"So what, are you here to stop me?" He said as his eyes bled red. "You?!" His voice was anger and false incredulity. A thick layer of sloppy bravado plastered on in an attempt to maintain his deluded worldview as sitting at the top of the food chain.

But there was the barest of a tremor in his knees and his hands hung unconsciously close to his weapons pouches. She registered as a threat to him, then.

Good.

"Nope." She popped the sound. "That would be hypocritical of me." She stood in a fluid movement, waving the stick of dango at him and causing his expression to twist sourly. The black tomoe of his Sharingan spun in dizzying circles. Her smile was entirely unkind.

She'd already given one of her teammates a kick up the ass. It only seemed fair she'd share the cold shock of reality equally.

"Then what?!"

"I just want to say something." She said. "Because hypocrisy pisses me off, and you. Are a hypocrite."

"What the-"

"Getting into a fight, trying to kill your comrade." She started and he scowled. "To what? Prove your strength? Use Naruto to measure your worth?" She pretended to not notice the way the Uchiha flinched. She knew exactly what kind of effect that phrasing would have after months of researching the massacre. "And now you're abandoning the village." She narrowed her eyes, her voice went flat. Her face unimpressed. "You're just as bad as Itachi."

The Uchiha snarled and threw himself at her, but she just kawarimied with a kunai on top of a nearby tree branch. The boy's Sharingan eyes flitted wildly around before locking on to her, his face twisted with pure rage.

"You have until I make it to the Hokage's office. At this time of night it might take me an hour, maybe even two. Then, I'm a Konoha chūnin and you're just a traitor."

She disappeared.

Sasuke's cry of frustration followed her into the dark.

-

"You have thirty minutes." The Senju said. "Gather as many worthy genin as you see fit, and leave immediately."

"It's going to be troublesome, but it's someone I know so I can't just let it be. I'll do what I can." The Nara replied.

"I would like to recommend to you Uzumaki Naruto."

The Nara nodded and left, a determined look on his face as he went. Once the door closed Sakura let go of the transparency jutsu, rippling into existence against the wall.

"And I'm here, because?"

"Insurance. I want you to follow team Shikamaru until they come into contact with Sasuke and Orochimaru's men, at which point you will follow any survivors to the traitor's hideout." The Hokage said, her face severe. She pulled an ANBU level scent masking uniform from

under her desk and threw it at her. Sakura caught the bundle instinctively. "Under no circumstances are you to reveal yourself or become involved in the fight."

"You're suggesting Shikamaru's squad won't be successful." Sakura's voice was flat, her face expressionless.

"I hope they will be, but it's highly unlikely." The Hokage replied, grimacing.

Sakura walked forward a few paces, slammed her hands into the Hokage's desk and pulsed as much killing intent as possible into the air. Her glare was poisonous, her face scrunched up in distaste. A tantō was at her neck, a kunai against her stomach, the two ANBU having reacted almost instantly. Threatening but not killing. Sakura ignored them.

"You're suggesting," Her voice was a whisper, low and furious. "That I abandon my comrades and refuse to help them even if their lives are at risk."

"Yes." The Hokage replied, not backing down despite the sheen of sweat building on her forehead.

Sakura could produce a *lot* of killing intent.

"If I do this, you will teach me how to punch through mountains." Sakura snarled and the Hokage nodded.

"Fine, but only if you're successful."

Sakura stopped the killing intent as suddenly as she started it, shifting her face into a bright smile. "Thank you, Hokage-sama!" Her voice was cheerful and the Senju looked thrown. The ANBU disappeared, but it was slower than they should have.

"Brat." The Hokage growled. "Hatake was right about you. You're a manipulative little shit."

Sakura laughed, bright and musical. "I'm flattered."

"Get going, we both have work to do."

Sakura activated her transparency jutsu again and disappeared out the window.

“Wait!” Sakura called.

“Sakura-chan!” Uzumaki cried. Sakura eyed the group of genin solemnly.

“Good luck.” She said to the blonde, then turned to the Nara. “Bring them home safe.”

“You’re not coming?” He asked, an eyebrow raised. She smiled sadly in response.

“I have a mission.” She replied. “To be honest I should have already left, but I wanted to see you all off.” She also wanted to check the team members and ensure that, on the small chance her uniform failed to block her scent, Kiba would pass it off as simply something on their clothes.

The Hyuuga would be harder to trick, but keeping her signature locked down and avoiding where he was ordered to focus should work. Hopefully.

“We’ll be fine, Sakura-chan!” The Uzumaki cried, throwing her a thumbs up. “That’s a promise!!”

“Thank you, Naruto.” She smiled and pulled the blonde into a hug, rubbing her scent well and truly all over him, before pulling away, using chakra to look teary eyed.

“Alright!” He yelled “Lets go!”

“Well, we’ve wasted enough time. Let’s hurry.” The Nara said, though he threw her a suspicious look, and the group headed off.

Sakura watched them for a moment before heading back into the village, finding a dark corner, performing a quick change, and sprinting back towards the woods. The glassy feeling of the transparency jutsu shuddered down her spine and she set off at a gruelling pace.

She caught up to the team just as they were shifting into the trees. She moved up to the thinner branches, only possible to move silently through due to her small size, and followed them unnoticed.

She turned off the small, sentimental portion of her brain that viewed these people as familiar and to be protected. They were a stepping stone to the target. Nothing more.

-

(She watched the Uzumaki visibly hesitate, one hand wrapped around his clone's and the other holding a ball of death, but it didn't last in the face of the Uchiha's Chidori laden charge.

Uzumaki didn't falter again.

The Uchiha turned out not to be a hypocrite.)

-

Sakura was tired.

The Sound four had been far more trouble than she had expected. In the end, it was only her training with Morino and a reasonable amount of luck that led to her being able to avoid their traps.

Her muscles were cramping. She was soaked through her clothes. Her bones were aching.

And yet she continued to watch the small building set into the dirt, almost invisible but from the right angle. The Uchiha had disappeared into it a little over four hours ago. As was protocol, she would watch the entrance for five, thus reducing the possibility that it was simply a pit stop before the boy was taken somewhere else.

It didn't eliminate it, especially considering that the building could have any number of back entrances, but it did reduce it. Just a little. Anything else was beyond her role in the mission.

Minutes passed. No one went in or out. It had been five hours.

Sakura stared a minute more at the building and turned to leave. She would need to hurry, she could only maintain the transparency jutsu for another hour or two, and she wanted to be well within Fire country before she had to drop it. Then there was a sound, just the tiniest rustle of leaves, and she paused. Looked back at the building to see a tiny, green snake sliding through the undergrowth. Internally she swore. It wasn't likely it could tell she was there, or that it was even a summons, but if it was and it *did* know and it got back to Orochimaru that a Konoha shinobi knew where the base was, it would be evacuated and burnt to the ground. Any intel she could give would be worthless.

She headed south east, intending to cut through the Land of Hot

Water to throw off any pursuers. Her Konoha Hitai-ate sealed inside a blood and signature scroll.

Her feet flew.

-

Her breaths were gasping. Her heart pounded in her ears.

Three Yuga shinobi were chasing her, two trying to flank her left as one on her right herded her into a trap. Her transparency jutsu had failed two thirds of the way to the border to the Land of Fire and she was running on fifteen percent chakra reserves. Her jaw clenched even as her cheeks were hurting from her feral smile.

A trio of shuriken launched at her from her left side and she was forced to turn to deflect them, losing a touch of her momentum and allowing the shinobi to her right to gain ground. They swiped at her with a kunai and she ducked, sliding under their arm and drawing her chokutō to slash at their stomach. The Yuga shinobi wasn't fast enough to dodge completely, clearly expecting her to dodge rather than risk injury, and took a shallow gash to the vulnerable flesh but she was prevented by following up on the attack by a second appearing to take a swing at her with a giant, spiked club.

She rolled and threw herself back into a sprint, hoping to gain even the slightest bit of ground and hopefully an advantage. No such luck. The third was waiting for her with a doton jutsu that smashed into her left forearm, definitely breaking it and causing her vision to white out with pain. She forced herself to push through it, launching directly at the surprised looking third shinobi and burying her blade through their eye.

She didn't stop to watch the man die, instead vaulting over him and drawing her blade out with a satisfying squelch, launching herself into movement to stay ahead of the two. They were faster than before. Angry that she'd killed their comrade. She wouldn't get away from this without their deaths.

Sakura had changed direction to head towards Kiri the moment she knew she would be detected, in the hopes the attackers would assume she was a shinobi from the land of Water. She had the reserves for one jutsu and maybe thirty seconds of a henge before she needed to stop using chakra entirely.

She turned, a manic glint in her eyes, and threw one hand in a seal

above her head as the other formed a clumsy seal over her heart. The pain in her arm threatened to stop her higher mental faculties completely but this jutsu was instinct. She didn't need to think to bend the water. The rain abruptly paused midair and coalesced into an opaque white mist. She heard her followers pause nervously, shifting quietly through the grass. She flickered a white henge on and launched herself towards their general positions. She wasn't experienced enough to track them exactly through the mist yet, but she sliced through the neck of one and got the other clumsily in the thigh before her thirty seconds were up and she had to run. The mist dissipating around them.

The third shinobi did not follow her as she sprinted towards Kiri, but they would live. It didn't matter. Any report they gave would mention the Kiri-headed shinobi using Kiri techniques. Finally far enough away, she changed course to duck directly back into Fire.

In a massive stroke of luck, she met no further resistance.

-

Sakura walked into Konoha drenched, covered in mud, and shivering with cold. Her only consolation was that the hypothermia had numbed the pain in her arm completely. She'd been forced to run on the ground for most of the journey through Fire, having not enough chakra to even tree hop.

She paused at the gate stand- not Kamizuki and Hagane, the guards actually forced her to dig through her pockets and locate the scroll with her hitai-ate before they let her sign in and enter the village- before making her way straight to Hokage tower.

She was stopped by a harried looking secretary before she could make it to the door, an ANBU appearing to back the kunoichi up.

"I need to speak with Hokage-sama." She said, frustration growing along with the return of pain in her arm as the warmth of the building seeped into her still shivering skin.

"You can't just walk in, you have to make an appointment!" The secretary insisted. Sakura smashed a fist against the wall, the secretary jumped and cowered back but she ignored it, instead turning poisonous green eyes to the ANBU.

"Haruno Sakura. I promise Tsunade-sama will want to talk to me." She said. The ANBU hesitated for a second before disappearing into the

Hokage's office.

"OF COURSE YOU SHOULD LET HER IN, WHAT KIND OF IDIOT ARE YOU?!" Came a muffled scream followed by a series of thuds and smashes before the Senju's blonde head appeared in the doorway. "Well?! What are you doing, brat?! You should have been back hours ago!! Get in or I'll punch you in!"

Sakura blinked before walking around the pale-faced secretary and heading into the office, taking a seat that a worried looking Senju pulled out for her. Green light appeared from the woman's hands and Sakura let out a sigh of relief as her limbs flooded with warmth and the pain in her arm faded away.

"Geez brat, what happened to you?" The Senju snapped, grimacing towards her forearm.

"I followed Uchiha Sasuke to Orochimaru's base as instructed, spent the protocol five hours watching the building to confirm the location." She dug with her good hand through the pockets of her jacket, pulling out the scroll with the mapped point of entry. The Hokage took it with a nod. "As I was about to leave, I spotted a small snake appearing from the entrance. I did not think it knew I was there, but just in case I moved to pass through the Land of Hot Water to throw off the track. At the time I thought I had enough chakra to maintain my jutsu into the Land of Fire and escape detection." The bones of her arm abruptly clicked into place and Sakura hissed, blinking back tears. "I did not take into account the amount I would need to cycle to prevent hypothermia. I was discovered twenty minutes from the border."

"I can't say you were wrong to choose to cut through the Land of Hot Water but the risk to your life was too much. All of that effort would have been for naught if you'd died and we'd never gotten the information anyway." The Hokage rebuked, poking a green finger into Sakura's palm and observing the twitches of her fingers.

"Mhm. I managed to change directions before being discovered, making it seem as though I was headed towards Kiri. I fatally injured two of the three man squad and seriously wounded the other using techniques Kakashi-sensei copied from Momochi Zabuza, so at least Yugakure will be looking for a Kirigakure shinobi rather than one from Konoha."

The Hokage sighed and dropped her- slightly tender but fully functional- arm. "You did good kid. Get some rest and refrain from

heavy chakra usage for three da-”

The sound of a gentle thud on the window made her pause, both of them turning to look at the scarecrow that had casually broken into the room.

“Hatake. At least knock before you waltz into my office.” The Hokage deadpanned. Hatake gave his best no fucks eye smile back at her.

“Maa, just making sure my cute little student is alright.” He turned an admonishing look on Sakura. “She was meant to be back hours ago, of course.”

“I got a little banged up, but Tsunade-sama was kind enough to heal me.” Sakura smiled and held up her arms, putting the full force of her best puppy dog eyes on the ninken owner. “Carry me, sensei?”

“If you insist.” Hatake sighed, crouching in front of her chair so she could easily climb onto his back. He stood, hefting her a little higher on his back and turning to the Hokage. The Senju’s face was a mix of annoyance and fondness. “Thank you for allowing us the use of your office, Hokage-sama.”

“Don’t test me, brat.” She growled and Hatake made for the window. “She’s on no heavy chakra use for three days.”

Hatake nodded and threw them into the night, smoothly making his way over the rooftops and towards Sakura’s house.

“The others?” She asked, voice almost a whisper.

“They’ll be fine.” He replied and she relaxed completely, melting into the man’s back and happily burying her face into the back of his jacket.

-

Sakura was poked awake. A finger tapping her forehead incessantly and she frowned, sleepily trying to bat the offending appendage away.

“Come on, Sakura-chan. I don’t think you’ll enjoy it if I leave you in bed without a shower.” Hatake drawled and she blinked her eyes open. She registered that she was still on the man’s back, on the windowsill of her bedroom, and groaned.

“Asshole.” She grumbled, clumsily dropping off him to sway her way

towards the attached bathroom, grabbing her previous night's pyjamas from a pile on the floor as she went.

Freshly showered, mud free, and clad in a hoodie and sweatpants that were far too big for her but were very, very soft; she stumbled back into her room to see Hatake leaned against the wall to the bathroom door's left, Icha Icha in hand. She looked up at him with a confused frown on her face, blinking sleepily.

"Just making sure you made it out of there, Pinky." He closed the book with a clap and eye-smiled down at her. "Wouldn't want you falling asleep in the shower and drowning."

"That would be an embarrassing way to die." She mumbled, rubbing an eye and yawning. "Thanks, 'Kashi."

Quick as a flash, a hand tilted her head forward till she was staring at their feet and an unmasked nose pressed against her hair, breathing in. Then Hatake was gone, only the open window giving any indication he'd been there at all.

She blinked out at the darkness.

She knew he had enhanced senses from his ninken contract, but she hadn't realised he used them that much during their day to day life. Had her lack of smell been bothering him? She figured that either way the man deserved it after the day he'd had; with one of his students going traitor, beating another to near death and the last appearing injured and exhausted hours after they'd been meant to show up.

Carrying her home when asked and sniffing her was, frankly, quite reserved compared to what a jōnin-sensei like Maito would do.

Sakura climbed into bed, only taking the time to cocoon herself in blankets before she'd drifted off to sleep.

you Know its Bad when you freak the Freaks out

Chapter Summary

In Tristan's world, Robin would have been the kind of insane homeless man that you walk an extra five minutes to avoid. Here, he has a position of great power in the black ops of a military powerhouse. It would be a positive example of affirmative action if it weren't for the certainty that if his mental oddities lead to a decrease in his work quality he'd very quickly end up dead.

The scroll came a week after the Uchiha'd defected. Hatake had disappeared on a mission and the Uzumaki was still bed bound. Sakura mostly spent her time taking monotonous d-ranks- most of them labouring in the areas of Konoha still being reconstructed- and training with Shiranui, Tatami, and Namiashi, since their status as Hokage guard meant they were some of the few shinobi actually in the village at least half the time. She was mainly working on refining her elemental transformation and dropping the chakra requirement for her shunshin.

It was currently using up a fifth of her reserves and was entirely impractical, but every time she performed one she got just a little bit better and was sure she was just a little bit closer to a breakthrough.

...Maybe.

She couldn't help it. The idea of shunshining everywhere was just far too tantalising for her to give up on the minuscule chance she'd find a way around the chakra requirements.

The scroll was almost blank, with nothing more than an address to report to, but she recognised it instantly. ANBU had come knocking.

She rushed through getting dressed in practical shinobi black and flak jacket, ensuring she had enough supplies packed to comfortably survive for a week or two, and choose to put her hair up into a practical, senbon laced bun. The wind whistled past her as she rushed over the rooftops. The completely nondescript building came into sight. A tiny bell rang over the door as she entered.

"Good evening!" Greeted a silky voiced woman, a wine red kimono dripping off her figure. "You must be Haruno Sakura." She purred,

walking around Sakura, eyeing her like a piece of meat. “Scroll.” The woman held out a hand, perfectly manicured black nails threateningly sharp.

Sakura wordlessly handed the scroll over and allowed herself to be ushered into a back room.

There, the woman hounded Sakura into stripping and threw a series of black bundles at her. They turned out to be various parts of the standard ANBU uniform so Sakura dressed and enjoyed the high quality material. Layers of breathable material, complex sealing work, and ninja fishnet to protect from abrasive wounds; it fitted snugly to her frame, just the right combination of tight fitting to prevent excess fabric and baggy to maintain full range of movement. She did, however, feel oddly exposed with the cold air brushing her shoulders, even if some quick stretches confirmed the slightly increased range of movement compared to her normal gear. The weight of the armoured vest would take some getting used to, but it was well fitted enough to stay put as she moved, at least.

Her thighs were bandaged and fitted with her holsters and her chokutō was strapped over her shoulder.

Lastly, she was handed a blank white mask which, after a small burst of her chakra, stuck comfortably to her head, seals on the inside keeping her breathing and line of sight unaffected.

“Off you go, come back to me when you start growing in, sweetheart!” The woman crooned as she pushed Sakura through yet another door.

Inside the door was a giant man with a bear shaped mask and a messy shock of brown hair.

“Blank.” He said, the mask’s seals making his voice sound hollow. Apparently that was Sakura’s designation for the moment. “I’m Bear, the current commander. You’ll have to henge your hair colour for training. After that you can do what you want.”

She nodded and took a moment’s thought to change her hair black, the henge settling over her like a second skin. The man paused, likely observing the lack of chakra bleed-off.

“Interesting.” He muttered before motioning her to follow him as he moved down a set of steps. “Normally we put potentials through a test but frankly we don’t have the manpower to be messing around and I trust Ibiki’s judgement. You’re the second recommendation he’s ever

made and his first is one of our most successful captains. Your training period will last the next three months. You're to report to headquarters at 0600 sharp every day you're in the village, but don't expect that to be often. We don't have the manpower to train you normally so instead you'll be shadowing teams on milk runs. You have three days to be competent in ANBU hand sign."

Sakura nodded.

"From what I understand you're gearing up to be a silent assassination specialist. Typically those mission are done solo and are exceedingly delicate so don't expect to shadow one of those for at least the first month. Ibiki said you could imitate chakra signatures?"

"Yes." She said, smoothly copying the man's next to her as demonstration. "I can also successfully open any seals keyed to just a signature."

"If you had a measure of their blood could you do blood and signature?"

"I've never tried but I don't see why not."

"Hm, what about summoning?"

"I have no idea."

The man nodded. "Some things to try." They entered into a surprisingly brightly lit lobby, a series of doors spanning off the space in seemingly random directions. Bear smoothly headed through one on the opposite side and down an identically confusing, brightly lit, and featureless hallway. They stopped in front of a door with a small yellow square in the middle. "You'll be spending today with Robin, he'll show you around and put you through your paces." He opened the door to expose a fairly normal office space, complete with filing cabinets, a wooden desk and piles of paperwork. Well, fairly normal except for the spindly man perched on the back of the chair, feverishly writing with a pen in each hand. Bear cleared his throat with an air of long suffering exasperation. Robin made a show of startling, throwing the pens wildly and launching up off the chair only to smoothly land back in the exact same position. "Robin, I have the Blank for you."

The man clapped once. "Wonderful!" He flowed off the back of his chair to reveal an almost seven foot frame and long, spidery legs. "And so small, too!" He stopped in front of her and ducked down, putting his hands on his knees and bending to be on her eye level.

“The small ones are always the most interesting!” He spoke like he was sharing some great secret with her.

“I’ll leave you to it.” Bear said, ignoring the other’s antics entirely and wondering off down the hall.

“Now, blankipops, let me show you around!” Robin said, throwing an arm over her shoulder- more just putting a hand on the shoulder furthest from him, tucking her under his wingspan as though she were a particularly shiny rock he was intent on protecting- and ushering her around the building.

-

Sakura’s mind was melting. Robin had dumped such a sheer volume of information she wondered how anyone was expected to remember any of it. She remembered every detail, of course- she hadn’t worked her ass off to train her memory for nothing- but she didn’t see how they could possibly *expect* her to.

Though to be fair, it basically all boiled down to ‘don’t fuck with other people’s stuff’ and ‘here’s a spot where you can shower and sleep when you’re too fucked to go home’.

Everything was disturbingly empty of people, a product of the high mission demand, and frustratingly confusing to navigate.

Sakura had been looking forward to hitting the physical part of the day and getting to unleash her frustrations but now, watching Robin seem to unfurl into the serious lines of a formidable predator, she questioned her own judgement.

She sighed.

At the very least getting soundly beaten might force her to learn something.

(It did. Sakura sucked. She desperately needed to get better.)

(At least Robin didn’t think she did too poorly if his delighted cackling was anything to go by.)

-

The next day she was assigned to a redheaded woman designated Egret.

"I'll be your seduction and culture tutor for the next few months." She said, gesturing for Sakura to sit at a small table, a delicate tea set laid out. "Participation in seduction missions is entirely voluntary, but every member of ANBU goes through a standard training course. How do you feel about potentially taking those kinds of mission?"

"I'm mostly indifferent." Sakura replied, tilting her head. "I don't particularly have anything against them, but I also don't particularly want to do them."

"Fair enough." Egret nodded. "You likely won't be assigned seduction specific missions, then, but they're a useful set of skills to have. Too many members in ANBU see them as something other than just another set of tools in their arsenal and make it harder on themselves by refusing to use them."

She poured two cups of tea, the calming scent of rose wafting through the small room.

"You're welcome to take off your mask," She said, slipping off her own and revealing a hinged face. "But until you finish training it's required you and anyone around you applies a henge before doing so."

Sakura nodded, slipping off her own porcelain after copying the woman's henge. The corner of her lip's twitched.

"Now, I might not be as you imagined a typical seduction specialist." Egret started, a humorous smile on her face and Sakura nodded. The woman did not look like someone who professionally got into other people's pants, dressed as she was in a comfortable tracksuit over a fairly plain frame. "When people think seduction they typically think of legendary beauties, throwing themselves at men with loose innuendo and exaggerated promiscuity. Beauty can help in this line of work, sure, but too much just ends up becoming suspicious. Most people don't just have ultra stunning women rubbing themselves against them and the high stakes targets you'll find in ANBU will be far too wary to be snagged that way."

She took a sip of tea and Sakura copied her, enjoying the pleasantly floral taste.

"And to be honest, the real secret to seduction is that the easiest way into someone pants isn't being irresistibly sexy, though you will be learning how to move and dress to ensure you the target sees you as a viable sexual candidate. No, the real secret to getting in someone's

pants is providing them one thing.” She held up a finger and leaned in. “Emotional fulfilment.”

-

Sakura’s third day was spent with Robin, testing an itemised list of possibilities with her signature manipulation.

They tested various combination of blood, chakra and password locks; trying both with her knowing the signature she was copying and ones she was not. In the end they figured out that if Sakura had access to the correct blood then she could get into just about anything, some seals requiring a few minutes of ‘jiggling’ to manage but most being fairly instantaneous. The longest it took her to open a seal was an hour and forty eight minutes, which was a giant one designed for high-value vaults and required four different signatures and their accompanying blood at the same time. Sakura had to smear the samples of blood on four different fingers and then produce four different flavours of chakra out of each finger simultaneously.

By the time she had finished she had a head-splitting migraine that Robin- thankfully- healed even as the man cackled wildly.

“The other village’s aren’t going to know what hit them!” He cried, putting both hands on his shoulders and shaking her excitedly. “Come on, come on, we’ll be testing summoning now!”

He sliced his palm and swiped a line of his blood across the floor. Sakura easily copied his signature- having been using his the most throughout the day- and sped through the hand signs for summoning.

Her palms hit the ground and the seal stretched before her, a warm feeling flooding her chakra before it tugged and she was falling.

Sakura landed hard in a bed of yellow grass, in the centre of a circle of delicate looking trees. She was entirely naked and weaponless, down to even the hairbands in her hair having disappeared. The soft pink spread out in a halo around her, a gentle curtain down to the small of her back as she pushed herself up to sitting.

“It has been many generations since a shifter has appeared.” A low, trilling voice reverberated. It shook in her very bones and sent a wave of dread through Sakura’s gut.

Her eyes traced the outlines of small figures on the trees, hundreds of small birds perched in the branches. Her gaze was invariably drawn to

a red-plumed tree directly in front of her, and a proud looking, pug sized bird glaring down at her. The only bird in the clearing unusually sized, it was a steely grey colour with a belly of black and white stripes. Shrewd yellow eyes peered down at her.

The more she looked the more the dread in her gut disappeared. It was hard to be afraid of creatures she could crush with a foot.

“Speak! For what purpose should we align ourselves with you, potential summoner?” It called and her eyes narrowed.

“Why should I even *want* to summon you?” She replied testily, the last remnants of the migraine pounding in the back of her skull as she pushed herself up to standing and crossed her arms. “I didn’t mean to end up here, nor do I know how you could be of use to me.”

The birds chortled, the clearing filling to bursting with low pitched warbling.

“You hold in you much spirit, child!” The head bird cried. “You shape yourself to fit amongst your broodmates all while growing into something utterly unlike them! We are not fighters and we do not do anything for free, but we Cuckoo’s are skilled at locating and stealing into other’s nests and scaring away those that would challenge us. If you sign with us you will find your own abilities changed and when summoned we are powerful tracking and information gathering tools.”

Sakura tilted her head and considered the prospect. As much as being able to summon village sized animals to fight for her would be useful, Sakura would never have the chakra reserves to handle those kinds of summons. However, small birds that would work as tracking and information gathering tools? Barely a drain on her reserves and very, very useful.

She smiled.

“Alright.”

Eight small grey and brown coloured birds flew over with a giant scroll between them, setting it before her and unrolling it to reveal a series of blood splotches.

“So do I-” She asked but was cut off by a hot flash of pain in her cheek, three stinging lines opening in her skin and a wave of blood running down to her chin, pooling on her jawline before dripping onto the scroll.

The world blurred away to the sound of birds laughing, Sakura found herself falling once again to land on her knees.

She blinked at her surroundings, the familiar sight of the ANBU training ground greeting her. Her uniform was strewn on the floor beneath her and a flash of pink in the corner of her eye confirmed that her henge had melted away.

Bear and Robin had paused from where they had been whispering furiously in one corner. Two pairs of the black voids of the mask's eye holes pinning her in place.

Before any of them could react further, her chakra *boiled*. Burning and bubbling out of her skin and sending Sakura screaming. The world melted away until all she could focus on was the way every atom in her body was being destroyed and remade, an otherworldly heat setting her alight and remaking her in the fashion of itself. She could feel her skin splitting, her nails twisting, her hair sparking and she was sure she must resemble little more than ground meat.

And then it stopped. As suddenly as it had started her chakra was settled once more, a little different to how it used to be but undoubtedly hers all the same. There were hands pinning her to the ground and her throat rasped as she breathed. The floor underneath her was sticky with blood and every muscle was aching.

"Well that was disturbing." Came the gleeful comment from Robin, the sound *wrong*. Too sharp and too clear, she could differentiate the layer of the distortion seals and the man's natural voice, something that *should* be impossible.

Sakura didn't stay awake long enough to hear a response.

-

She awoke clean, warm and staring up at the familiar sight of a hospital ceiling, but warped. Her range of vision was a touch too wide and the indents a touch too crisp.

In the fashion of a true Konoha shinobi she felt the immediate and irrepressible urge to escape, pushing herself into a sitting position.

"Don't even think about getting out of bed!" Came a sharp voice from her right. Sakura turned to watch the Hokage walk through the door, march to her bedside, and use a steel grip on her shoulder to force her back into the bed. Every movement seemed to catch her vision, every

time motion of the woman's body standing out against the still surroundings.

"I'm fine." Sakura protested even as the woman's hand lit green and she scowled.

"Exactly!" The Senju growled. "According to the commander you're body turned itself inside out and back again and yet there's absolutely nothing wrong with you! If anything you're too healthy!"

"Great!" Sakura smiled cheerily up to the aggravated woman. "Can I go home now?"

"Absolutely not!"

"You can't keep a healthy person prisoner in the hospital."

"I'm the Hokage, I can do what I want!"

"You're the Hokage, you have a million other things that would be a better use of your time."

The Senju lifted the glowing green hand off her and snarled angrily. "Fine, but I'll see you at training ground five tomorrow morning, 0500 sharp, your appearance at headquarters isn't due until later that afternoon."

"Oh?" Sakura asked, a bubble of excitement in her chest. The Senju smiled a toothy, vicious smile.

"I'm going to teach you how to destroy mountains." And with that the blonde stormed from the room, shouting orders down the hall, leaving Sakura to change into her shinobi blacks and flak jacket.

She headed up to the Uzumaki's room before she left, spending an hour with the exuberant blonde before she headed home, too eager to experiment with the strange new aspect to her chakra and the noticeable changes to her sight and hearing to stay long.

-

Sakura stared at her reflection in the mirror. She looked exactly the same aside from three thin white scars underneath her right eye, and yet she knew she had changed.

Her range of vision was wider and her eyesight clearer. Movement seemed to stand out more, tiny shifts of leaves and blurs of passing

shinobi she would have once missed now seemed like neon lights to her brain. Her hearing was better, too. Not just the range of sounds she could hear but her ability to differentiate between the layers. Where a crowd was once white noise it was now a series of different, hearable conversations up to two or three streets away.

Both of these were extremely cool and entirely overwhelming. Just walking home left her head ringing from the sheer volume of noise and movement in Konoha.

She'd given up and climbed to the rooftops halfway there. It was... easier up high.

Sakura'd also discovered (don't ask how) that her control over and ability to produce killing intent had multiplied exponentially and she was able to send a whole block of people sweating with just a passing thought. (Don't. Ask. How)

Then, there were the shape changing abilities.

Eyes intent on the pink of her hair Sakura applied a small amount of chakra and willed it brown. The hair changed. She stopped supplying chakra to it. It stayed brown.

It didn't have the distant quality of a henge nor the chakra requirement of a jutsu. It was just brown. She had willed her hair brown and it turned completely, physically brown.

A few hours of gleeful messing around with her body led to a few discoveries:

First; she could not change the size of anything. She could affect shape of her face and hair- i.e. flattening her nose, giving herself curls- but she couldn't remove or create mass.

Second; changing her colouring was easy as breathing but affecting her shape was far harder, it was done with an uncomfortable pinching sensation and long minutes of concentration, unless she was changing back to her natural features.

Thirdly; she could not change the shape, positioning, or colour of the scars on her cheek. She could cover them up with makeup or a traditional henge but it itched horribly.

And lastly; for all the changes were permanent until she changed them again, her lizard brain found itself wanting to change back to her

natural features after a few minutes of looking otherwise. Her changed face feeling dissociated uncomfortably from herself.

That night, she changed her hair purple before she went to sleep. It was still purple when she woke up.

-

Sakura arrived at the training ground five minutes early to find the Senju already standing in the middle of the field, an excited grin on the blonde woman's face.

"Good morning, Hokage-sama!" Sakura called and the grin turned into a grimace.

"It's too early for that shit!" The Senju groaned. "You can call me shishou!"

"How about baa-san?" Sakura asked and the blonde raged, appearing next to her and a fist pounding the back of her head.

"Shishou! Shishou!" The Sannin insisted. "Don't make me sound like some old woman."

"Ah, sure, shishou-oba-san."

The blonde groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose. A hand clasped Sakura's arm and she was dragged to the centre of a training ground, where a series of boulders were set out in a semicircle.

"Right, my enhanced strength follows some fairly simple theory but the execution is impossible for someone without near-perfect chakra control." The blonde said. "For you, it should be easy, but it takes time to build up your body's tenketsu points to handle the pressure this technique puts them under. You are not, under any circumstances, to perform this technique without my supervision until I give the go ahead. We'll be meeting here every morning you're in the village for the next three months, I aim to have you on my level of destructive force by the time you officially become ANBU."

Sakura nodded and they shared a smile. The blonde pulled a marker and grabbed Sakura's hand, making a series of dots over the skin.

"Your main tenketsu points on a fist are here, here, and here." She gestured to three slightly larger dots across her knuckles. "To release a burst of strength, your aim is to gather your chakra into those points

and at the exact moment of impact force it out of your body. As they become acclimated to the process we'll work on getting you to activate the smaller one's as well. The important thing to remember is it's not so much about the amount of chakra you can build up, but instead the pressure you build by condensing it in your tenketsu points and the speed with which it is released."

She let go of Sakura's hand and walked over to the first boulder.

"To demonstrate." The Senju said, pulling her fist back. Sakura focused the feel of the chakra in the air, tasting it gather in the front of the woman's fist and then explode as it struck the rock. The boulder shattered, blowing outwards and into tiny, tennis ball sized chunks. Sakura smiled.

"Go on." The Senju said, pointing to the next boulder.

Sakura pulled her fist back, concentrated on building her chakra, and struck the rock. The chakra left her hand sluggishly, forming a small crater but with none of the explosive power.

"Good, try again."

Sakura's morning became a monotonous process of punching and releasing, but by the end of it she could make a boulder split in two and the Hokage had an excited gleam in her eyes.

Inappropriate Humour is the New Black (ops)

Chapter Summary

Because if you can't share a joke whilst you murder innocents, why the hell are you in ANBU?

Chapter Notes

Exiting news! The very first alternate POV chapter is out with a short Kakashi POV, so check that out and bookmark if you want to know when it updates because I'm not going to post a note on here every time I do.

Here's a link to it:

[Kakashi POV](#)

(Hopefully that worked, HTML is hard lmao)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sakura walked into ANBU headquarters and was almost immediately accosted by Robin.

“Blanky!” The man crowed, taking his customary position herding her through the building with an arm over her shoulder. “Good to see you up, I heard from the commander that you were fine but it was hard to believe without seeing for myself, you know?” He gave no time for her to reply, instead barreling on as he shepherded her into one of the team lounges. The room had a set of sofas, a conference table, equipment racks, lockers and a series of blackboards. It was also covered in a fair amount of personal clutter, from photos and posters on the walls, to a deck of cards and piles of chips on the table. “It was hard to believe you were alive after that shit. I mean I’ve seen some really messed up stuff but that was vomit inducing, Blanky. A ten on the gross scale.”

“Robin!” A voice interrupted, a rich baritone under the distortion.

“Horse!” Robin replied, swinging Sakura around to face a giant of a man. “I brought the Blanky for you!”

“I’m Horse, I’ll be you captain for the next few days.” The man said, ignoring the gangly weirdo behind her completely to offer Sakura a hand. She shook it, her own disappearing entirely in the man’s grip.

“The other three should be here soon, but I wanted to get a feel for you before they showed up.”

“Goodbye Blanky! Have fun!” Robin called from where he was disappearing through the door, Sakura waved vaguely after him.

“It’s good to meet you, taicho.” She said and he nodded, gesturing her to take a seat on one of the couches as he took an armchair.

“For the mission we’ll be destroying a series of caravans through Earth country, so I’ll get you to just watch the first one and provide support for the next two. The team is assault heavy, with a focus on sheer destructive power over stealth, so we’ll be running hard and fast for the two or three days until we’re back in Konoha. How’s your stamina?” He asked, voice methodical and professional.

“Great for a thirteen year old, but I’m still limited by my age.” She replied and he hummed.

“We’ll see how you go at first but speak up if it’s too hard on you, any of my team would be more than able to carry you.” His voice decidedly less professional and instead with an amused warble behind it.

She nodded, not doubting the statement. She really was very small for her age.

“Have you fought in a large-scale battle before?”

“Mhm, during the Konoha Crush. Since I was only a genin at the time I fought as purely a support, however.”

“That’s alright, you’re not here to do the mission for us, you’re mostly here just to learn how a team functions in the ANBU, so I likely won’t ask you to do anything greater than a support role.”

“Hey Taicho!” Called a voice from the door, a blonde man coming in followed by two others. Sakura realised with a burst of humour that the entire team were giants. As the only girl and a good two heads shorter than the shortest, she would look ridiculous next to them. “We have a newbie?!” He asked excitedly.

Sakura stood and bowed. “I’m Blank, I’ll be shadowing your team on this mission. Please take care of me.”

One with a spiky mane of black hair chortled. “She’s a little small,

isn't she taicho? Are you sure she'll be able to stay in one piece?"

"The commander seemed to think so." The captain replied, dry humour lacing his voice.

"I may be small but that just puts me at the perfect height to stab you in the balls, senpai." Sakura replied and the blonde teammate laughed.

"I like her!" He said and held out a hand. Sakura shook it firmly. "I'm Leopard, the asshole is Parrot."

"Otter." Mumbled the third, before he collapsed into a couch.

"Right!" Said the captain, who had started handing out a series of mission briefings. "Today we'll be heading..."

-

Sakura was perched on Otter's back- having gotten carried on and off since they left Fire country to conserve her energy for the fights- as they approached the second target. The first had gone completely smoothly. Sakura had watched as the team moved in sync to destroy the shinobi guard, comb the caravan for survivors and burn the wagons to ash.

For the second one, she would be providing support.

'Approaching' The captain signed and she slipped off Otter's back, shutting down her chakra signature to nothing and drawing her chokutō. Typically, support shinobi fought at long ranges, providing projectile fire and keeping watch for runners. Sakura would be using her kawarimi abilities to flit through the battlefield at high speeds instead. Providing an extra slice or opening when the others needed it.

The caravan became visible as the five members flitted through the trees. Eight shinobi surrounding the wagons, two samurai and fifteen civilians. Sakura activated her transparency jutsu and climbed into the very top branches, overlooking the entire scene, only able to comfortably perch on them due to her small size.

She stabbed a coated kunai into the wood.

With an almost soundless bird call, the captain signalled the attack and the four men charged. They managed to fell three of the eight shinobi in quick succession, but the remaining five reacted faster and

rallied together. Sakura watched the fights keenly, her sharp vision picking out five targets and latching her chakra on to them in a manner of seconds.

She caught on the first one, deactivated the transparency jutsu, pumped her chakra into her chokutō and swept through the battlefield in a flash of electric blue. Six effortless kawarimis happening in quick succession and leaving a trail of chakra infused wounds. On her last swap she activated the transparency jutsu again, returning unseen to her bird's eye perch.

She jammed another coated kunai into wood and went again, going through a further four kunais before the battle had finished.

When the captain gave the all clear and Parrot begun burning the wagons she dropped to the ground, a bright grin underneath her mask.

"You did good, kid." Said Horse.

"Thank you, taicho!"

"For the next one I want you to take an approach, see how you do in an assault position."

"Understood, taicho!"

-

Sakura crept through the bush, the captain was to her left flank and the other three at the other corners of the approach. There were five samurai, nine shinobi, and twenty three civilians. The largest of the set by far, it had the greatest chance of something going wrong.

A quiet birdcall.

She leapt from the undergrowth, her electric blue chakra roiling over her chokutō and rammed through a shinobi's chest. She tore it out, already swinging through the air in an arc of blue, meeting the next opponent in a whirlwind of blades. Her eyes flickered around her as she ducked and dodged, slicing a line in the man's calf and landing a kick in his ribs. She sent out chakra instinctively, searching and coating opportune areas as she worked. The shinobi stumbled backwards and she switched with a chunk of dirt behind him, her sword slashing cleanly through his neck.

She ducked a water jutsu, ignored the slight pain of scratches where she hadn't moved fast enough and switched with a man's sword, gleefully driving her own into his eye. Launched off the body and rolled under a swipe of a katana, shifting to her feet to meet the blade's next swing with her chokutō. She pushed off, ducked the next swing and opened his stomach. Taking a jagged but thankfully shallow slice through the shoulder for her efforts.

Sakura glanced around, the shinobi were dead and the last of the samurai were being fought off by Horse. The battle was over. She helped the others move through the screaming civilians like slicing through beef. Entirely dispassionate in the face of the bodies.

"You know, if you didn't have such dogshit chakra reserves you could almost be tokubetsu level." Leopard laughed as he broke a woman's neck.

"They're not dogshit, they're fun sized!" Sakura yelled, pointing her chokutō threateningly at the man. The smell of ash filled the air as Parrot burnt the wagons.

"Oh yeah, and how much do you have left after all this fun?" The man taunted.

"Seventy three percent." She replied, smugly, sheathing her sword and setting a hand on her hip.

"Wait, really?" Interjected Otter, a significant amount of incredulity in his voice.

"I'm very economical." She sniffed, walking over the Leopard to climb onto the man's back in response to the captain's signalling.

"Aha, and how much does a shunshin use?" Leopard chuckled, following an exasperated captain through the trees.

"A fifth." Sakura mumbled.

"Sorry, what was that, I couldn't hear?"

"A fifth!" She yelled. "Fucking asshole."

"Oi, Parrot!" He cackled. "Could you imagine?"

"The fuck would you do? Fucking walk everywhere?" Parrot replied.

"I'd rather walk than be some brickhead doton user." She said and

Leopard squawked angrily.

“Shut up!” The captain called and they instantly quieted. “Were on high fucking alert until Fire.”

The rest of the trip was passed in silence, until Sakura shifted to run upon entering Fire country and Parrot and Leopard began needling Otter.

It was two hours out from Konoha when she heard it.

“Taicho, I hear fighting ahead.” Sakura called. Horse glanced at her once and nodded.

‘Formation 3’ the captain signed and the four men settled into a diamond whilst Sakura activated full stealth mode and moved upwards, into the very tops of the trees.

They were only moving for five minutes before they burst into a clearing, a very tired looking Maito holding off a group of four missing-nins- three Kumo and one Konoha. The ANBU team wasted no time in diving into the conflict, working in tandem to take the enemy shinobi down.

Sakura watched from her perch, satisfied she didn’t need to step in to help but coating a few options just in case. It was because of that she saw the fifth, just a flash of metal against the grass, sneaking up behind an oblivious Maito.

She dropped from the sky, drawing her blade and streaking it into the fifth missing-nin’s back. The woman- konoha hit-ate with a scratch through it- gasped once before dying, drawing the attention of the green-clad jōnin. Sakura let the jutsu end.

“Thank you for your assistance, my comrades!” Maito smiled, teeth gleaming as he offered her a hand up. She took it, sure her expression was bemused under the mask. The man was covered in arcs of mud and blood, one arm hanging limply at his side and a significant limp as he walked. Sakura had to wonder what the hell had managed to do that to one of the best jōnin in Konoha.

“Always happy to help.” The captain said. “Do you want a lift? My boys could use the workout.”

“That would be most welcome!” Maito boomed, a disturbingly pained smile on his face. “I am afraid I would be unable to reach Konoha

without collapsing!” His tone was chipper. He stretched into a pose and gave a thumbs up before wincing and passing out entirely.

The five of them stared down at the green mess for a moment before the captain sighed.

“Otter, carry him.” He ordered and the man complied. “Blank, on me.” She clambered onto the captain’s back without a complaint. “Double time, detour to the hospital. Might as well get our shit looked at whilst we’re at it.”

The hospital was thankfully quiet when they arrived- a product of the amount of shinobi just not in the village to clog the system up- so they were seen to fairly quickly. Maito was rushed into the emergency ward but a few questions and Sakura found out that he’d be fine.

Her shoulder was healed and she headed back to headquarters, showering and changing into her chūnin gear before heading straight back to the hospital.

“Hey Naruto!” Sakura said, a smile on her face and a box of meat buns in her hands.

“Sakura-chan!” The Uzumaki yelled, clambering out from where he’d been... hiding under the bed?

“Are you... okay Naruto?” She asked, he sent her a blinding grin as he scrambled onto a seat.

“Totally!”

“Right.” She nodded. “So, any juicy hospital gossip for me?”

“I’m getting released tomorrow!” He said, grabbing a pork bun in each hand and talking between bites. Sakura grabbed one and ate more slowly.

“I’ll try to come see you but I’m not sure I’ll be able to, sorry.”

“That’s okay Sakura-chan! You must be really busy, since you’re a chūnin now!”

“Yeah, everyone’s really busy nowadays. What’s the first thing you’re gonna do with your freedom? Hot springs? Training?” She leaned in with wide eyes. “*Ramen?*”

“RAMEN! Of course! Ero-sennin wants us to leave at the end of next

week so I have to have Ichiraku's every meal to make up for it."

"A noble goal. How will you survive? Three years without ramen?"

"I'm really going to miss old man Teuchi." The Uzumaki sounded actually despondent. Her lips quirked.

"And what about me, huh?"

"Of course I'll miss you, Sakura-chan!" He replied. Sakura reached for another bun.

"What do you think Jiraiya will teach you?"

"I bet he'll teach me tonnes of awesome justus and I'll totally...!" The Uzumaki babbled excitedly, Sakura relaxed back in her chair and let it wash over her.

-

Sakura didn't see the Uzumaki again before he left.

She didn't really see anyone again as the next few months passed. She barely spent time in the village and any time she did spend was either sleeping, training with ANBU or training with the Hokage. Hatake was never in the village when she was, Shiranui was either working or sleeping, and T&I had even cancelled their monthly shoji tournament they were so overworked.

Before she knew it, the three months of her ANBU training were finished and the commander was handing her a painted mask whilst a fresh tattoo ached on her shoulder.

"Welcome to the force, Sparrow." Bear said as she swapped the blank mask for her new one. It was minimalistic with just a few black lines denoting a beak and the eyes surrounded in red. She changed her hair back to her natural colour.

"You do realise I'm not going to be tiny forever, right commander?" She said. He patted her back and laughed. She despaired.

"Information on your handler for solo missions and your team assignment for larger ones. They're expecting you in team room eight." He handed her a scroll and she nodded.

"Thank you, commander."

“Don’t thank me yet, you’re just about to take the kiddie pants off after all.”

She headed for the team room, pausing just before knocking on the door to take the bun out of her hair and letting it flow freely down her back.

What would be a team introduction without some mind games?

She knocked.

“Come in!” A man called from inside and she opened the door, peering inside and fidgeting.

“Team Ro?” She asked, eyes flitting over the four, mask-wearing ANBU. There were three men- two sitting and one standing as what was obviously the leader- all with pretty common hairstyles, but there was a woman with *very* distinctive purple hair sitting on one of the couches.

Uzuki Yūgao? Was she really on a team with Gekkō’s girlfriend?

“That’s us.” Said the standing one, voice cheerful underneath the distortion. Sakura jumped a little before heading into the room fully and closing the door behind her.

“I’m Sparrow, your new teammate, please take care of me!” She said with a bow, letting her pink hair spill over her shoulders.

“Good to meet you Sparrow, I’m the captain, designation Tiger.” His voice sounded distinctly less cheerful. He pointed to the man immediately to his left. “This is Panda, our ninjutsu specialist.” He pointed to the second man. “Monkey, our long range support and healer.” He pointed to the woman. “And Cat, our kenjutsu specialist. As I understand it you’ll be supporting us on missions where an extra member is needed but you’ll be doing your own for most of the time.” Sakura nodded.

“Yep, I’m first and foremost an assassination and infiltration specialist, but I’ve proven pretty good in the messier fights too.” She said. One of them snorted.

“Yes, well, messy is our specialty.” Tiger chuckled, rubbing a hand through his hair. “We’ll run team drills for today, I want to see your full arsenal and get to know each other.”

Team Ro assembled in a fairly simple training ground, sparse trees and a few pools of water. As Panda walked past he clapped a hand on her back and whispered. "Don't worry kid, we'll go easy on yah!"

"I'm not worried at all, senpai." She replied and he just shook his head slowly as he joined the other three in standing across from her.

"Alright we'll start off with a mock battle just to get a basic feel for each other. The four of us against Sparrow. Obviously nothing lethal or aiming to seriously injure, we'll stop when one side is knocked out or forfeits."

Sakura nodded. Briefly considered putting her hair back up and then discarded the idea. She wanted to make a statement.

She eyed the training ground. There wasn't much she could kowarimi with.

She smiled under the mask.

"Alright..."

If there wasn't enough rubble, she'd just have to make it.

"Begin!" Tiger called, the four immediately begun moving into positions but Sakura was already slamming her fist into the ground. There was an almighty boom and the earth shattered, chunks of rubble and dirt flying through the air. Sakura rode the wave of mess upwards, used it to disguise a series of hand signs, and activated full stealth. Her careful eyes flickered over the mess and she spotted Tiger balanced on a particularly big piece of rubble, the other three either gathering their footing still or circling the spot she was a second ago.

Sakura sent out strings and kowarimi'd with a chunk behind the captain, pulling a kunai and placing it at his neck as she dropped the transparency jutsu.

"Do you forfeit, taicho?" She purred. He swallowed nervously but didn't say anything, she felt something wrapping around her feet. It was a trap.

She cursed and stabbed the clone, making it pop out of existence and kowarimi'd out, going back to full stealth. This time she headed for Monkey, kowarimi'd next to him and smashed a kunai butt towards his temple.

Despite the fact that she was nearly invisible and very difficult to be sensed via chakra, the man managed to smash a palm into her wrist to block, undoubtedly leaving a bruise, centimetres before it hit. Sakura panicked for half a moment before she realised that it was because she was actually leaking a low level of killing intent she couldn't reign in. She could see the movements of the others out of the corner of her eye, about to descend on her position.

Well, if she was leaking it anyway.

Sakura giggled and unleashed the full force of her killing intent, concentrating it onto Monkey and making him freeze just long enough for her to catch him- lightly, she wasn't actually trying to hurt the man, he'd play along with the checkmate- with the kunai. The man dropped to lay still on the ground and Sakura turned, caught a swing of Cat's katana on the kunai, and kawarimi'd again just as wood was climbing up to her knees.

Her eyes widened. Tiger was a *mokuton* user.

She watched Cat pause, form half a hand sign, and then subtly gesture in Sakura's direction.

Cat was a sensor, but not a natural one. She wouldn't be able to see suppressed chakra like Sakura's very well, and very likely couldn't differentiate between clones faking her chakra and the real thing.

The ground beneath her feet began reforming and shifting, rising around her to form a sphere over her head. She threw herself upwards, tried to kawarimi out but her strings were cut, her shoulder smashed into solid earth infused with chakra and prevented her from escape.

Sakura clutched a hand over the throbbing limb, settled into a meditative position and concentrated, suppressing her chakra as much as humanly possible even as she shaped it to match the chakra that made up the bubble.

Outside, a water clone kawarimi'd onto the battlefield and headed for Panda. Sakura could feel the moment Cat determined she hadn't been captured and the chakra retaining the barrier was stopped.

She kawarimi'd with a second clone, leaving it inside the bubble and concentrated on suppressing her chakra, now on the very outskirts of the training field.

The clone going after Panda was melted into water with an exclamation from the man and the clone inside the bubble was wrapped in wood, effectively captured as the dirt was lowered back to normal. The clone dropped the transparency jutsu, apparently forfeiting as the trio of remaining ANBU circled it, Sakura and her final clone both kawarimi'd back onto the battle field.

Sakura turned visible as her clone stayed stealthy, drawing her chokutō and pumping it full of her electric blue chakra. The clone tightened its chakra signature to basically nothing, easy for it to do as it only had a tenth of Sakura's power.

Sakura grinned beneath her mask and launched herself at Tiger in an arc of blue and pink.

The man twirled as the captured Sakura melted into water and sent wave of wood after wave of wood, Sakura simply slicing through them with her chakra enhanced blade, spotting the attacks easily with her eyesight.

She caught a scuff of a foot behind her and she twisted underneath another wave of wood, spinning and throwing a volley of shuriken, driving Cat backwards. The back of the clone's kunai caught Panda's temple as he sped through hand signs, dropping the man.

Two down, two to go.

Sakura kawarimi'd next to the clone as it dropped the transparency jutsu and relaxed its hold on its chakra suppression, making its signature seem slightly bigger than her own. Making sure a sensor would read the clone as the real one.

They turned to the remaining pair together, facing them back to back and launching themselves in tandem. Sakura reducing her movement speed to match the clone's.

Cat moved to intercept them first, Tiger supporting the attack with sprouting barriers of wood rising up from the ground, and Cat swept into dance of the crescent moon, her blade turned to hit with the flat. A highly confusing attack using shadow clones and afterimages to make it near impossible to read their movements, it would have worked.

Would have if Sakura hadn't been trained by Gekkō.

There was one tiny, tiny opening on the move. Sakura and her clone

simply positioned their swords in the correct place and watched the two clones burst into smoke and the real Cat launch herself away.

Sakura and the clone darted backwards from a wave of wood, slashing through the attack with their electric blue chokutōs and throwing one hand in the air and the other in a seal over their hearts. Opaque white mist covered the battle field and the two Sakura's hinged themselves white and threw themselves towards Cat.

With her enhanced hearing, tracking people through the mist had become second nature and her clone flanked the woman as Sakura launched an attack from the side. Cat, clearly using her sensory abilities, went straight for the clone, sending a slash that she clearly expected it to dodge, the woman jolting when the hit instead went through its shoulder and it melted into water.

Sakura swung a hand forward only to be jerked to a stop, the tips of her fingers an inch away from Cat's neck and wood holding Sakura's limbs in place in the air.

She realised her jutsus, unravelling her signature as the mist dissipated.

"I forfeit." Sakura said and the wood melted away and back into the ground.

"That was impressive." Said Tiger as Monkey appeared from the sidelines to set medical green hands over her shoulder.

"Thank you, taicho, but I have to disagree, you were all going easy on me, after all."

"Of course, kid, but that doesn't mean it wasn't impressive."
Interrupted Monkey.

"Says the first to get kicked out!" Taunted Panda, the man materialising next to Cat. He went the throw an arm over the woman's shoulder's but was stopped by a kunai pressed against his neck and he backed away, chuckling. "What got you again? A little killing intent?"

"It wasn't just a little! I genuinely felt like I was going to die."

"Come on guys, let's talk strategy and run a few partner drills." Tiger said, causing the pair to quiet. "What are your reserves looking like, Sparrow?"

“Twenty seven percent, taicho.” Sakura replied. “The clones took the most out of me, I can only make six of them at the moment.”

In true ANBU fashion, the team begun immediately making fun of her tiny reserves. Sakura sighed but her smile remained under the mask.

-

That night found her bruised and aching and with a bright grin on her face as she sat in a booth with her unmasked teammates, sitting against the wall with an inebriated Monkey (who turned out to be a tokubetsu called Sanada Eito) on her right and laughing at Cat (she was right, it was Uzuki Yūgao, tokubetsu), Panda (Kita Itsuki, tokubetsu) and Tiger (Tenzō, jōnin) across from her, all squished into the bench and well into drunk.

She took another small sip of her sake (she loved that this world had the attitude that if you were qualified to kill people professionally you were old enough to drink) enjoying the bubbly sensation it was giving her but not wanting to overdo it, as Tiger waved a hand at her melodramatically.

“You’re fighting style reminds me a lot of our last captain.” He slurred, sloshing sake out of his cup. “Completely fucking nuts.”

“Talking shit about me kohai?” Came a familiar lazy drawl and Sakura whipped her head around to see Hatake standing at the end of her table, eyebrow raised down at the captain.

“T-taicho!” Tiger spluttered, straightening up and flushing horribly.

“Kakashi-sensei!” Sakura said, ignoring the way the other occupants at the table turned to her with a mixture of horror and bemusement.

“You’re in the village!”

“Aah, our illustrious Hokage graciously gave me a three day break before my next mission.” Hatake said.

“Man, things must be slowing down again.” Her grin turned scheming. “Want to celebrate by getting roaring drunk and telling me a bunch of embarrassing stories about my new taicho?”

He blinked, looked at an increasingly distressed looking Tenzō, and nodded. “You make a convincing argument.” He disappeared in the direction of the bar.

“Wait, you’re that Sakura? You’re Pinky?!” Tiger (loudly) whispered as he leaned over the table, taking a giant gulp of sake.

“Mhm.” She mimicked his position. “What does sensei say about me?”

“Basically every shinobi in Konoha knows not to fuck with Kakashi’s genin.” Interjected Cat. Sakura nodded.

“And since I’m the only one still around-”

“The threat is three fold.” Hatake said, appearing between Sakura and Monkey in a blink of an eye, Icha Icha in hand and a drink in front of him.

“I knew you were threatening people behind our backs.” Sakura said. “You know after Wave the only one with the balls to come up to me was Genma.”

“Aah, is that how that started?” He said and she nodded, drawing her knees into her chest and relaxing into her corner of bench. Somehow half of Hatake’s cup disappeared during the movement.

“I cried, laughed at him, slammed a door in his face and then blackmailed him into buying me food.” She raised her cup in celebration. “We’ve been besties ever since.” A hand ruffled her hair.

“Congratulations on graduating, Pinky.” He said, looking up from his porn with a serious expression on his visible slither of face. “You’ve earned it.”

“Thanks, Kakashi-sensei.”

Chapter End Notes

Another link to the Omake if you don't want to scroll all the way up and your top button breaks as much as mine does:

[Kakashi POV](#)

Go read it!

Spooky, Scary, Ninja Powers

Chapter Summary

Baby's first S-rank mission.

(Because there is literally no one else available.)

Chapter Notes

CW: Depictions of attempted rape/sexual assault. The scene is short and not super graphic and Sakura feels little more than mild annoyance but it is there. Plot wise, this chapter is skippable. It acts as the background to one of Sakura's main techniques moving forward as well as some minor political stuff but neither of these things will require you to have read this chapter to understand them. Do whatever's best for you, fam :)

“Commander this is an S-rank mission.” Sakura said, bursting into the man’s office and brandishing the scroll she’d just been handed.

“I am aware.” The man deadpanned, not looking up from the paperwork he was signing.

“With all due respect, commander, I am nowhere near ready for an S-rank mission.”

“Sparrow.” The man said, leaning forward to lock beady black eye holes with beady black eye holes. “You were assigned that mission due to your specific skillset. Yes, the mission is S-rank, but that is due to the location and level of infiltration and stealth required, both aspects you excel at. I would not have signed off on the order if I did not think you capable.”

The confidence in the man’s voice made her straighten subconsciously.

“Understood, commander!” She said heading out the door.

Just before Sakura closed it she heard a mumbled “Of course our usual specialist is in hospital and everyone else is out of the village.”

-

After a week long crash course in accent training (a Yamanaka jutsu could give her consonants the softened sound typical of regional areas

in Lightning, but she needed training to mimic the typical word choice common to such areas) Sakura headed for the land of Lightning. She travelled non-stop until she hit the shore of the Land of Hot Water, at which point she changed and left behind everything shinobi-related but a single, very (very) well hidden storage scroll.

Dressed in a basic, hardy kimono typical of rural communities, with her features changed (black hair, brown eyes and coffee coloured skin) and carrying a small sack with extra changes of clothes and civilian travelling rations; Sakura activated full stealth and headed across the water, intending to skip the Land of Frost and arrive in Lightning near a small fishing village.

Once in Lightning she moved entirely at civilian pace, taking three days to reach the Northern coastline- quicker than she'd expected as she was able to hitch a ride on a wagon with a gullible old couple- and settled into a cheap inn for the week.

The festival started the next day and would last for five, Sakura's mission was to kill her target- the Leader of the town- as he made a speech on the fourth night. Until then, she was nothing more than a country civilian, enjoying the wonder of such a large, cliffside port town.

Unsurprisingly, it was extremely boring.

Sakura spent her days walking the town, making friendly with some locals and generally spreading her fake backstory. Her nights were spent enjoying the festival, a bright, loud affair that gave her a headache after a half hour but she had to continue playing her role for far longer. She often went to bed queasy and woke up feeling hungover. She would have to figure out some way around that when she got home.

It was on the third night of the festival that everything started going to shit. There were plenty of Kumo shinobi around the town, acting as security for the high profile festival, but with her chakra imitating an untrained system and acting suitably civilian Sakura didn't garner any suspicion. It was almost certainly why she had been chosen for the mission, unlike other shinobi she had the ability to blend in essentially anywhere on the fly. She didn't require expensive, complex seals to hide her signature and as such her infiltration missions were far more flexible.

Of course, she also couldn't act at all like a shinobi, so when a pair of

civilian hands dragged her into a darkened alleyway, one clamped over her mouth to muffle her screams, she had to let it happen. She struggled, of course, but there was only so much she could do without blowing her cover.

Against the three large, leering men surrounding her in the dark the civilian Sakura was impersonating had less than zero chance of getting away. One of them pushed her wrist against a wall and they all began taunting her. A hand pushed her kimono aside to rub at her admittedly meagre chest. She put on a good show of shaking and screaming in fear, though the hand clamped on her mouth muffled it.

Internally, she sighed in mild annoyance. Her mind whirling as she tried to figure out what to do.

Not only did she not particularly want to get raped, but she *couldn't* get raped without likely blowing her cover. Currently in her vaginal cavity was a specifically designed scroll the size of a pinky finger within which was sealed the gear she required for tomorrow night. She could kawarimi without detection but there was a high chance the group would report a 'civilian' that randomly disappeared before their eyes. She wasn't competent enough at genjutsu to use it without spiking her chakra, which would alert any nearby Kumo shinobi, and making a clone to switch places with would create a similar problem.

Her only real choice was to 'miraculously' escape, lure them to somewhere less populated and take them down with taijutsu.

She shifted her weight and opened her mouth under the hand covering it, preparing to bite.

She didn't need to, the men were ripped away and knocked unconscious with the unmistakable speed of a shinobi.

Sakura stared and backed up against the wall, holding her kimono closed in a white knuckle grip and swirling her chakra behind her eyes to create tears. They rolled down her face in molten hot tracks, blurring her vision as her breathing stuttered. A very angry looking Kumo shinobi stood in the middle of the pile, staring down at the men with an expression of distaste.

"Th-th-thank you, shi-hinobi-san." Sakura stuttered out between sobs, sinking into a crouch and pressing her face into her hands. A hand fell onto her shoulder and rubbed soothing circles. Sakura wanted to burn it off.

“It’s alright, you’ll be fine, they’re gone now.” The shinobi murmured under his breath and she made a show of collecting herself, wiping away the tears and snot and drawing herself back up to standing.

“Thank you.” She said, bowing to the teenager. “I-I will head back now.”

“I’ll walk you there, make sure you get back alright.” He said and she swore internally. “Where are you staying?”

“The cool rock inn, and that’s not necessary shinobi-san, you’ve already helped more than enough.” She said, already walking in the inn’s direction.

“Call me Omoi.” He replied, falling into step with her. “And I could hardly let a pretty girl like you walk through the dark, I mean what if in your distress you tripped on a banner, knocking over a vender and setting off a cascade of falling buildings that caused the cliff to collapse and sent the whole town into the sea.” The man looked more and more panicked as he talked and Sakura’s brow furrowed.

Wh-what?

“I... see.” She replied but the teen didn’t even seem to hear her, instead launching straight into describing another ridiculous train of ‘possible’ events.

This continued the entire way back to the inn. It wasn’t far, just a few streets from the festival- hence why she was staying there- but it was far enough and the theories were insane enough that her head felt like it was spinning by the end of it.

“Thank you for taking care of me, shinobi-san.” Sakura said, sinking into a bow, at the building’s door, cutting off a rant about how the rise of wheat prices could bring about the total collapse of the economy and lead to the world reverting back to the warring era politics. “I owe you a debt.” When she raised herself back to standing he was rubbing bashfully at the back of his head and blushing.

Oh no.

“Stay safe.” The teen said before abruptly disappearing. Sakura faked a civilian style jolt of surprise before hurrying into the inn and up to her room.

She had a terrible, terrible feeling about this.

When Sakura left the inn the next morning, intending to buy something from the docks for breakfast, the Kumo shinobi jumped off the building's roof and landed next to her. She 'startled' and pressed a hand over her chest.

"You... returned." She said and he smiled.

"I realised I never got your name!" He cheerily stated, running a hand through his hair and strolling next to her. "What if the depth of my rudeness caused you to fall into a depression and commit suicide?!"

"It's Aiko." She deadpanned. "And I can assure you that would never happen."

"But it could have!" He protested. "I couldn't just leave you to die!"

"You have very a strange way of thinking, shinobi-san." She gave her best, fuck-off eye smile in her repertoire. The teen did not seem at all deterred.

"You know my name, Aiko-chan!"

"M afraid I forgot shinobi-san."

"It's Omoi! Omoi!"

"Not a very fitting name for an idiot."

"Yeah it's- HEY!"

Sakura smiled at the food vender and took the pair of boxes. She shoved one into the chest of the shinobi and he took it automatically. "Now we're even, shinobi-san. Please stop bothering me." She said with her cheeriest smile and girliest voice.

"A box of fish isn't equivalent for saving your life!"

"Then what do you want in return, shinobi-san?"

"A date." He said with a 'charming' smile. It took effort to hold down the victorious smirk and instead glower at the fool. This smelt like an opportunity.

"Let me get this straight." Her tone was poisonous and the shinobi's face fell. "You save a girl from getting taken advantage of, and you use that fact to take advantage of her and force her on a date with you?"

“Wait no, I-I didn’t”

“That’s disgusting, yah pervert!” Sakura stormed off, ignoring the horrified expression on the shinobi’s face, breathing a sigh of relief when he didn’t follow her.

Hopefully that would be the last she saw of the teen.

(It was not)

Sakura spent the rest of the day preparing for the kill. She met up with one of her summons inside a small park, feeding it caterpillars in exchange for a viable location. Then, she headed to the location, an abandoned building, taking the risk to activate her transparency jutsu and slip through an open window.

There she pulled out the scroll, unsealing the contents and laying them out.

A bucket of water, a change of clothes, a naginata, a red oni mask, her chokutō and four paper tags. She set out the tags in the four cardinal directions around a small area of flooring. The seal went up with a tiny flicker of chakra, hopefully little enough to go unnoticed.

It was a fairly simple barrier but effective, working as a gentle notice-me-not on the area. Sakura, knowing the stuff was there and wanting to see it, was unaffected but anyone who just so happened to enter the abandoned building would find their senses just skipping over the space. It also had a mild chakra dampening affect, so when Sakura entered the space and formed a water clone- shaped to look how she would later that night- it shouldn’t have been sensed. She left the gear laid out, slipped back out the window, and waited until she was a few blocks away to disable the transparency jutsu.

She spent the rest of the day in her room, well within range to maintain the water clone. That night, she dressed in one of her fancier, but still simple, kimonos. As would be expected of a civilian on the most important night of the festival.

The streets that night where strung with red paper lanterns. It bathed the entire scene in an eerie red glow. The complete lack of moon and haphazard distribution of the lanterns leaving harsh shadows that emphasised the often lopsided and cramped nature of the stalls lining the streets.

The streets themselves were packed. Couples competed in games for

small prizes, drunken groups of men with the distinctive reek of fisherman hung out on every corner and children wearing oni masks of all manor of colours and shapes darted between people's legs. Where the previous nights had been lively, tonight was sheer, unadulterated chaos. The humidity of the air seemed to hum with the combined excitement of the townspeople.

A few hours into the night, an unfortunately familiar presence hoped off the roof and landed next to her. Sakura flinched and levelled a glare at the sheepish looking teen.

"I'm not here to bother you, I just wanted to apologise." He said and handed her a small pouch. Sakura hesitated for a half second before taking it. She was a civilian. He had no reason to try and kill her and she had no reason to display suspicions of tampering.

It was a brooch. With delicate gold wiring and strategically placed rubies, it was a beautiful piece. Sakura's frustrations rose exponentially, even as she made sure to look suitably awed. Something like this?

Extremely expensive.

So expensive that the country hick civilian Aiko would likely have never seen something so expensive in her life. So expensive that most shinobi wouldn't have been able to afford it, let alone splurge it on a girl they'd only known for a day. It could be that the Kumo shinobi just felt that bad for how he'd treated her but it was far more likely the shinobi was an extremely wealthy one, instead.

Almost definitely jōnin level, then. Shinobi-san was dangerous.

"It doesn't go with my kimono at all." She said and in a stroke of luck it really didn't, the green and the red clashed horrendously. She tucked it in an inside fold of her obi, out of site from the ensemble. "But I'll carry it with me."

"So, am I forgiven?" The teen said. Humour bubbled up Sakura's throat, making her fight down laughter as she breathed. It wasn't like she could say no. The shinobi had quite effectively cornered her, entirely inadvertently. Sakura's persona wouldn't, no couldn't, say no to a gesture as large as this one.

"I suppose so, Omoi-kun." She conceded and the teens entire face lit up in a smile.

“Oh, man, I was really worried you were going to tell everyone horrible things about me and then it would spread throughout the entirety of Lightning and even my family and friends would hate me and I’d just become a bum living in the streets!”

“...right. Shinobi-san.” She said, inwardly despairing.

“Hey! Don’t pretend you don’t know my name after you just said it?”

“Your name? Was I told such a thing?”

“It’s Omoi! Omoi!”

“Are you sure? It doesn’t fit you at all.”

“Hey!”

They wandered towards the centre of the festivities with the rest of the crowd, taking up a pace before the small stage that had been set up. Their bickering dying out to silence as dancers took the stage.

Sakura waited. The transition would be perfectly seamless, but she didn’t want to take any risks. So she waited until the shinobi had become absorbed in the performance. His eyes stopping their constant scanning for entrances, exits, threats, and watching the dancer’s movements with undisguised fascination.

An intensely careful twist of the practically nonexistent strong connecting her with her clone and her chakra caught. She abruptly found herself inside the warehouse and started stripping. A few efficient motions and she was dressed in unadorned black, her hair and skin changed to match. Her eyes went a bloody red as she settled the mask over her face, the weight of it a relief after spending so long in enemy territory exposed as she was. Her chokutō was strapped across her back and the naginata settled in one hand.

Everything else was sealed back into the tiny scroll and a series of hand signs later it was destroyed. Nothing left behind but a small pile of ash. No one really knew where sealed items went, though it was commonly accepted that the seals created some kind of pocket dimension, but there was no known way to get them back once the seal was destroyed. Burning the scroll was effectively burning the contents.

She wouldn’t come back, after tonight there would be too much scrutiny to stay as Aiko. She would slip past the guards during the

chaos caused by her kill.

Sakura activated the transparency jutsu and slipped out a window, taking to the rooftops. She took a position behind the stage and set the naginata down gently.

The town leader shuffled to the front, beginning the speech to an enraptured audience. Sakura raised one hand in a seal above her head as the other formed a seal over her heart.

The mist rolled in ever so slowly, looking natural at first until it gained more and more momentum. She heard the barked orders of the surrounding shinobi guard and she threw out a wall of killing intent, sending the crowd into a panic and massively reducing the enemy shinobi's ability to effectively work. She made the mist rapidly thicken until it was almost entirely opaque.

Her transparency jutsu still activated, Sakura picked up the naginata and streaked towards the stage, smashing the bladed tip through the heart of the leader and hefting the spear upwards, burying the butt into the wood. The mist dissipated. Her jutsu dropped.

The crowd had just enough time see the red of the mask and glowing red eyes behind it leering around the bleeding, suspended body of their leader before she'd shunshined away. She aimed for her maximum distance and slammed herself back into full stealth mode the moment her surroundings stopped blurring. Behind her she could hear the panicked cries of the crowd, the confused orders of the shinobi.

The client's request had been a touch melodramatic.

Then, she heard something that sent ice through her veins.

"Aiko-chan!" The Kumo shinobi crooned from behind her. Sakura abruptly realised that in her haste she hadn't noticed the clone melt into water. She hadn't stopped the jutsu. It had been popped. The teen caught up to her, latching onto the slight distortion in the surroundings that gave away her position and swiping at her with an abnormally long katana. Sakura rolled under the hit and kawarimi'd forward desperately. The man's eyes searched for a half second before landing on her, basically ignoring that she was all but invisible. He was dangerous.

Sometimes she hated being right.

She growled and undid the jutsu. At this point it was just a worthless drain on her chakra. He laughed and sped towards her, catching up despite her best efforts.

“It was so rude to ditch me for a water clone!” He taunted and slashed with his sword. Sakura met it with the blade of her chokutō, slamming a kick into his ribs as she did and sending him flying.

She ran desperately, slipping past the village defences and into the mountains.

Just when she thought she’d lost him he launched from around a rock, streaking towards her side. She twisted and met blade with blade, slashing and ducking and dodging each hit even as the back of her mind sent out strings as far as her chakra would go.

“How did you even know?!” She demanded incredulously, panting from the speed of the fight.

“The brooch was infused with my chakra!” He replied, a delighted grin on his face. “I knew the moment the swap had happened.”

His strikes were furiously strong, each time their blades met it sent shockwaves through her arms and sent pins and needles through the limbs. If she wasn’t careful and blocked the wrong way they’d be dislocated.

“I went home and I started thinking what if she was an enemy shinobi, and the entire scene was just a show to get close to me and gain super secret Kumogakure information? So I infused my apology present and planned to use it track you after you assassinated my kage!”

But Sakura was faster. He slashed from above and she blocked it one handed, ignoring the strain from her arm as she slammed a palm into his stomach. She didn’t have enough time to build up the chakra required to blow him to pieces, but the hit sent him flying.

Sakura kawarimi’d thrice, appearing over a kilometre away from where she’d been a moment ago and she ran, reactivating the transparency jutsu as she went.

The shinobi caught up to her just as she was hitting the Southern shoreline.

Sakura sprinted full pelt towards Kiri, rolling under a kick and

jumping over the waves. He descended on her in a flurry of large, sweeping attacks and she jumped and ducked and rolled through them. She made it out to the open water before the katana caught the edge of her mask, ripping it off her face, and she was forced to block with her chokutō.

“Pretty and a talented kenjutsu user?” The shinobi said, smiling at her as he stabbed forwards and she twisted to slash at his wrists. “Where have you been all my life, Aiko-chan!”

She snarled and pumped chakra into her blade, twisting in waves of electric blue over the water and forcing the shinobi on the defensive. His expression was pure surprise but she ignored it, instead working on pushing forward in a dizzying barrage of attacks.

“You’re an idiot.”

His stance shifted and his own sword lit up with lighting. His movements dramatically increased speed.

Sakura panicked. She threw more and more chakra into the blade, trying to simply slice through the shinobi’s own, until it was dripping around her arms in swirls of electric blue. Pulsing in and out of her skin. The muscles in her arms became stronger, their movements faster.

Her smile turned feral.

She slammed his katana up and slashed across his rib cage, leaving a bright line of red through his grey jacket. She followed the attack up with rushed a chakra boosted kick, sending him soaring, again, to the shoreline.

The wound unfortunately wouldn’t be fatal, but it should stop him from following her at the very least.

She shunshined out to the water as far as she could, activated the transparency jutsu and ran towards Kiri until the land disappeared over the horizon, at which point she changed direction towards her stash in the Land of Hot Water, periodically dipping under the water and out again to erase her scent.

She arrived to a very (*very*) hefty pay check and a very relieved pat on the back from the commander.

bingo books and child murder

Chapter Summary

These ninja are very blasé about Sakura's probably inevitable death, but they have good taste in cake so she can't find it in herself to mind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Two weeks after the Kumo mission Sakura found herself sitting at a table with the other members of the rookie nine (except for the Uchiha and Uzumaki, of course) and Maito's genins. At the end of the table, the four jōnin sensei were commiserating over drinks.

Sakura was sat between Hatake- near the end- and the Nara, looking over the ten assembled children in bemusement. It was likely just because of the volume of time she'd spent either in ANBU or running assassinations, but listening to the conversations about D-ranks and the 'cool new jutsus' they'd been learning made her feel as though she was experiencing whiplash. Even Nara, her fellow chūnin, was describing straightforward escort missions and basic courier runs.

She was grinning but it held an edge of bewilderment despite her best efforts.

(Had the volume of time she spent behind a mask affected her facial control?)

"No way is forehead prettier than me!" The Yamanaka screamed and Sakura tuned back into the conversation to see the blonde pelting cutlery at Lee.

"I totally agree." Sakura added before leaning forward with a sly smile. "Though, I was posing as a civilian for a mission a couple of weeks ago and this shinobi spent the entire time hitting on me. I kept telling him to go away in less and less subtle ways until I just gave up and called him a pervert and an idiot." The Yamanaka had apparently forgotten about her jealousy and instead had a dreamy look on her face.

"What did he do? Was he cute?"

“He gave me a brooch, apologised and tagged along through a festival but then I- I left. And I guess? If you’re into awkward fifteen year old?” Sakura replied with a chuckle. Yamanaka nodded decisively.

“You should go see him again!” She smashed a hand on the table.
“You’d be perfect for each other!”

“You just want less competition.” The Nara laughed.

“You just don’t understand true romance.” She said.

“Who cares about all this girly stuff, anyway?” Complained the Inuzuka, with a noticeably not dropped voice.

“You will, once puberty hits.” Sakura said, taking a chunk of meat from the barbecue.

“Never!” He insisted. “Me and Akamaru will rise above such disgusting foolishness and learn cool jutsus instead!”

“You are misguided, why? Because it is in the basic nature of a species to want to procreate.” The Aburame said and the table dissolved into a feud between the prepubescent and the hormonal.

“Sakura.” Hatake said from next to her, holding out a small, black book. She took it and read the page it was open to before blanching.
“It’s Kumo’s.”

Sakura looked down at the Bingo Book entry, a drawing of a black-clad figure with her facial scars in white and the featureless chokutō glowing electric blue looked back at her. Underneath was an order to ‘capture on sight’ and a bounty for five million ryos.

“Am I going to get in trouble for this?” She asked quietly and his head tipped.

“Probably not. It’s not linked to a specific village and its vague enough that even if they did link it Kumo wouldn’t have a leg to stand on if they wanted to complain.” He replied and she grimaced but nodded.

“But B-rank? Seriously?” She handed the book back and he eye smiled down at her. “Isn’t that a little much?”

“No.” He said before whipping out his porn and ignoring her incredulous expression. She huffed but turned back to the argument that had somehow shifted into a war about the which affinity was

better. She stood up for her water and lightning and laughed at the offended expression on the Hyuuga's face.

-

Sakura walked into the Ro team room and was immediately assaulted with a flurry of confetti.

"Congratulations!" Four voices called at once. Sakura closed the door numbly.

"What?" She said, her voice toneless. The room was decorated with strings of balloons, a thin layer of confetti, a pink and green cake in the centre of the table and a giant banner reading 'You're a wanted man!!!'. The four members of team Ro were wearing pink, glittery party hats.

Monkey bounded over to her and slipped on her own party hat whilst Sakura was still reeling from shock.

"We're celebrating your first entry in a bingo book." Tiger said, arms spread wide.

"I... thought everyone would be mad." Sakura said.

"Why would we be mad?" Monkey asked, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"I'm in the bingo book because I screwed up. I was discovered and I failed to kill the one who discovered me."

Cat laughed. "Everyone fucks up, Sparrow."

"It's considered something of a right of passage for ANBU members." Added Panda. Monkey directed her to take a seat at the conference table. "Well, except for this guy." Panda jerked a thumb in Tiger's direction.

"You've never been in a bingo book, Taicho?" Sakura asked as he took position at the head of the table, dragging over a blackboard as he did. The others all settled into seats to watch him.

"Ah, never." He replied, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. "I spent my younger years being drilled on the importance of keeping the mokuton secret and I got too good at it, I suppose." The man mumbled and Sakura's eyes narrowed. She could smell a story in that,

but she knew this wasn't the time to poke.

"That's impressive." Sakura said. "Why are the ANBU not wildly known though, if it's so common to get caught?"

"For most of us we will gain a bingo book entry and then fade into obscurity until it's removed, the anonymity of ANBU makes it too hard for other villages to keep track of us so we end up gaining many individual entries over the years, but none greater than c or b-ranks as they don't know the full scope of our movements." Cat explained. "You have a very distinctive fighting style, however, which makes your achievements easy to pinpoint. Other villages will begin to pick up on your identity and it will likely become common knowledge that you're ANBU, not unlike how Kakashi's position was well known. You will be targeted."

"In other words, you either get stronger, quickly, or you die." Panda said, his tone matter of fact beneath the mask's distortion.

"To prevent the latter from happening, we will be stepping up your training." Tiger said and the dread in Sakura's gut built. The man was already a slave driver, she didn't see how it could get worse without her simply dying outright. "There's a good chance you will die."

Ah. That explains that then.

"But in reality if you do not get dramatically stronger then you will be inevitably culled by the other villages, so you dying during training would just mean it was meant to be and your death is not our responsibility." The captain said callously. Sakura felt a smile pulling at the corners of her lips. "The commander also knows this and your solo missions will likely receive a massive increase in difficulty. This is sink or swim, but I promise if you swim you'll be a legend when you reach the other side." The man's hand flew across the blackboard Sakura's eyes widened as watched.

It was insanity.

An exact regimen for food pills, medical ninjutsu and chakra stabilisers. A schedule for fourteen hours a day, seven days a week of training. Increasing masses of training weights, going to upwards of two hundred kilos.

She was probably going to die.

Or she was going to *LIVE*.

“Hai, taicho.” Her voice was breathless with anticipation. He slammed the piece of chalk into the bottom of the board, turned around and clapped his hands.

“And now, cake!” He said and Cat and Panda cheered, both reaching over to cut a piece and ending up in a scuffle over the knife. Monkey ignored the pair entirely and drew a kunai, slicing serves and setting them out before them on flower patterned paper plates. “We have a mission as a five man squad this afternoon, so we’ll worry about this more when we get back.” He said, grabbing the chalk and flipping the board to the other side.

Sakura pushed her mask forward, tilting her chin down to hide anything that was shown by the action, and took a mouthful of extremely delicious raspberry cake. The others doing the same. It was something of a taboo to take the mask off in ANBU headquarters outside of the private dorm rooms and the showers. A habit born of long years of paranoia and maintained through that continued paranoia. It meant that outside of teams it was rare to know who the other members were. Only the commander and the Hokage had a full list of its recruits.

It perhaps made the corps too easy to infiltrate- which is why the security measures around the headquarters and any information were immense- but it also made it near impossible for an infiltrator to gain any real knowledge of the organisation.

“Right, the village received a tipoff of a possible Orochimaru lab. Our job is scope it out and, in the event we find evidence linking back to the traitor, perform a full cleanse.” Tiger’s voice was clear but there was an undercurrent of sadness to it. Cat’s hands tightened their grip around the fork. Monkey breathed in an audible gasp and Panda froze, completely still.

The monster inside Sakura lifted its head and bayed for blood.

“Sparrow, your job will be to...”

-

Sakura bit her thumb to draw blood and sped through the hand signs of a summoning jutsu, slamming her palms into the ground and creating a burst of smoke with a small bubble of chakra.

“What do ya’ want, huh?” The small bird said haughtily. “I was busy!”

"I need you to scope out all the entrances to the cave in front of us as well as any information you could tell me about the layout inside." Sakura said. "I'll feed you a hairy caterpillar upon completion."

"Five caterpillars." The bird demanded.

"Two."

"Five or I'm not doing it!"

"Three. I'm not here to make you fat as well as lazy." Sakura's tone was firm, the bird trilled angrily.

"Fine, but they better be juicy or I'll peck your eyes out!" It said before taking flight, moving rapidly through the leaves and in the direction of the cave.

"Are your summons always so... argumentative?" Asked Cat from behind her and Sakura chuckled.

"Yep!" She said. "Their entire evolution was based on laziness, to the point where they refuse to raise their young, instead hatching them in other bird's nests and forcing them to do it instead. But because of this, they're experts at adapting to different situations, locating all the entrances and hidey holes of a building and avoiding confrontation, whether by infiltrating other populations or scaring their opponents into fleeing. They're not any use in a fight but they're super useful for the preparation for one."

"That does sound useful."

They waited in silence for her summon to return, the five perched in the branches of a giant pine tree. The bird arrived in the gentle flap of wings and quiet birdsong. It flew down to the ground and Sakura followed.

"The main entrance is one thousand, eight hundred, and twenty four metres in that direction." The bird started and sketched an arrow into the dirt with its beak. It continued to draw what- in Sakura's experience with the creatures- would be an exactly to scale map. "There are three main entrances here, here, and here. Each with five guards protecting them. On top of that there are two secret entrances, one had two guards disguised above it here, the other had no protections. In fact, it looked as if the occupants were not even aware of the others existence, it was very dusty." The bird marked doorways as it drew. "From what I could see, the insides went something like

this.” It then proceeded to mark in hallways and doorways from each entrance, up until the hallways reached a corner and they disappeared out of the line of sight. “The distance between these two entrances was eight hundred and fifty one metres.” It indicated the closest and the farthest from their position.

“Good job.” Sakura praised, pulling a jar of caterpillars from a stasis scroll and tipping three of them onto her hand. She stroked the bird’s belly as it perched on a finger and gobbled up the insects, moaning and muttering about the taste under its breath as it did. Once finished, the bird burped and disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Sakura packed away the jar.

“Alright, looks like we’ll be taking a door each.” Tiger said, grabbing a stick and pointing at the diagram. “What’s your preference for an entrance to infiltrate, Sparrow?”

She pointed to the unmanned entrance. “If the members of the lab don’t know about it, then it’s likely this entrance will be keyed to Orochimaru’s signature alone. If that’s case I’ll be able to open it and that would serve as evidence to link him to the base. If it’s not his signature then I should still be able to open it and I’ll infiltrate from there.”

“Will he not have protections in place to protect from that kind of thing?”

“It’s unlikely. Before I came along, Orochimaru was the only person capable of mimicking signatures and to nowhere near the extent I’m able to. He did see a snippet of my abilities when he attacked my genin team but they were fairly untrained at that point and since the entrance is excessively dusty then he probably hasn’t touched it since before that confrontation.”

“Alright.” He nodded. “Monkey will take this entrance.” He pointed to the entrance with two men before it. “Cat, Panda and I will take here, here and here respectively.” He pointed to the three main entrances, positioning himself the nearest to monkey whilst Panda was the nearest to Sakura’s. “Upon Sparrow’s signal Monkey and Cat will take down their guards and then hold their positions at the entrances whilst Panda, Sparrow and I will make our way through the building, cleaning as we go. Cat will use her sensory abilities to ensure no one escapes and Monkey will standby for support and medical treatment. We will move in a clockwise pattern through the building. Since my abilities are good for it, I will be capturing who I can from the

workers I come across for T&I, but aside from that we can't risk it. Leave no survivors."

They split up, moving silently and unseen through the trees as the four settled in wait to attack the entrance guards. Sakura activated full stealth and worked her way around the small hill the lab was set into, coming upon a blank piece of rock embedded with a doorway, only visible due to a slight shimmer her enhanced eyesight picked up. She approached the rock, twisting her signature into the cold sharpness of Orochimaru's and pushing a trickle of it into the rock. Sure enough, it swung outwards silently.

She pressed a button on the radio around her neck and spoke quietly. "It opened to Orochimaru's signature."

"Confirmed. Move in." The captain's crackly voice whispered over the device and she drew her chokutō, swinging herself onto the tunnel ceiling and heading down the hall. The door swung shut behind her and artificial lighting flickered on, revealing the dusty tiles.

She moved unerringly into the depths, coming to a stop at a wooden trap door. It opened to a giant laboratory, twelve glass tubes with children floating in their depths lining the walls and tables filled with piles upon piles of lab notes. She flickered off the transparency jutsu (unable to maintain the use of her elemental transformations at the same time) and pumped chakra into her sword. She sliced through the glass of the first tube and straight through the head of the test subject. The machines monitoring its vitals abruptly stopped.

Eleven children's eye snapped open and locked onto her. Their bodies began to morph and change, limbs bubbling and shifting into grotesque caricatures of wings and swords and giant claws. They smashed against the glass as they changed, eight forcing their way out of the tubes as two pounded unsuccessfully against their cages.

The eight pounced, rushing at her in a wave of pure, murderous rage and super human strength. Sakura knew they wouldn't stop until they'd torn the very flesh from her bones if they caught her.

Her heart pounded in her chest. Her breathing quickened. Her hands were steady on her blade.

A feral smile stretched her face.

Sakura danced through the crowd of murderous children in a flurry of electric blue. Her chakra emboldened sword slicing cleanly through

morphed grey flesh and leaving streaks of red in it's wake. The children presented a challenge through sheer numbers and their tenacity, continuing to throw themselves into the attack when even their limbs were severed, but they lacked the intelligence that seasoned warriors contained. They were little more than dumb, hungry animals.

Sakura did not take long to put them down.

When she was finished she slashed through the remaining two test tubes and left the room. There was a cleanup crew not far behind them that would take care of the bodies and collect the experiment notes.

She encountered three more rooms with test tube babies in them as she walked, the second one she encountered had attacked her in the same manner as the first but the other two had not even woken up as she disposed of them. There were a series of very dusty, very empty rooms before she came upon a set of double doors.

It opened to a cavernous space, split in half by a wall of metal bars. An unassuming, middle aged man sat in the centre of the other side, eyes closed as if meditating.

He didn't react as she stepped into the room, nor did he react when she walked the length of the bars to observe them, but he did react when she hovered a finger over the 'open' button on the control panel.

"Are you my lunch?" The man rasped, unending black eyes boring into her. "A little skinny for a meal but I'm not picky." His lips stretched in a smile that exposed sharp teeth. "It's been *so long* since I ate."

She pressed the button. The door in the centre of the bars swung open. The man leapt out of it on all fours, shifting and bubbling into a monstrous panther out of a nightmare as he did. His face formed a snout and his teeth lengthened, his body bent and bowed and grew jagged spikes of grey. His hands and feet twisted into paws with oversized claws and a tail covered in razor sharp quills sprouted from the base of his spine.

He leapt across the tiles at her and bat at her body with a giant paw. She ducked underneath the swipe and gained a slash on the mans' arm before he backed off, only for the skin to almost immediately reform. She dodged a second strike and slashed at his face as he went for a bite. The man reacted too quickly to her strikes, dodging before she

could do any lasting damage, and there was a calculating gleam in his eyes she didn't like.

She couldn't use her chakra-enhanced attacks for risk of caving in the entire building and since there was almost nothing in the room she couldn't kawarimi. Chakra intensive techniques were out of the question as she didn't know how much more of the lab they hadn't explored yet and her sneaking abilities would require her to un-infuse her sword, significantly reducing its cutting power.

Her control over the technique was shaky and she could only get it to work on her arms and a small portion of her legs, but Sakura begun circulating her electric blue nature release, mimicking the feeling from her S-rank mission. Her speed and strength increased and she jumped over one of the attacks, landing on the man's arm and using it as leverage to stab her chokutō.

He twisted, jagged rows of teeth reaching for her and she raised her left arm guard to protect herself. His mouth closed around her forearm at the same time her sword slid through his brain. The man's powerful jaws shattered the protective metal, teeth sinking through flesh to scrape the bone, before his eyes rolled back into his head and he collapsed backwards onto the floor. His body morphed back into a normal man's and she double checked his pulse. Dead.

Sakura looked down at her torn up arm for a moment before she slashed the remnants of the guard and bicep-length glove off, bandaging up the torn flesh tightly before she moved back towards the door.

She turned two corners, opened three doors to see a library, a bedroom and a weapons room, and nearly walked straight into Panda.

"Sage, what happened to you?" The man hissed and she tilted her head. Apparently his search had not been as eventful. The man had a few splashes of blood over his uniform and no injuries. In comparison, Sakura knew she must look dramatic, with her whole body practically bathed in blood and a rapidly reddening bandage wrapped around her left forearm.

She raised her bandaged arm and waved it before him.

"The test subjects were hungry." She deadpanned.

"Fuck."

“That was the last of them.” Cat crackled over the radio.

“Confirmed.” Crackled the captain. “Retreat to point A.”

“How close is your door?” Sakura asked the man in front of her.

“Pretty close, I circled back to it a few times.”

“Alright.” She gestured forwards. “Lead the way.” The man did, setting down the corridor at a comfortable pace. Sakura followed, relieved when his door was, indeed, far closer than hers had been and they were soon making their way through the trees and to the meet up location.

“What the fuck happened to you?” Said Monkey, the man already moving forward to press a green coloured hand onto her forearm.

“A monster bit me.” She replied and he snorted.

“I’ve stopped the bleeding but this will need to see a hospital.” He said, sadly removing the green hand of pain relief and happiness and unwrapping and rewrapping the mangled flesh with clean bandages. “You’re not in danger of dying but if I set it wrong you could end up losing a lot of manoeuvrability in the limb. Obviously don’t use the thing until we get it checked out.”

“Aah.” She replied. “Thank you, Monkey.”

“Any other injuries?” The man asked the squad and they shook their heads. Sakura noted that Tiger was covered in far more blood than Panda but far less than her. Was she an unusually messy fighter or did she just get lucky?

Either way she didn’t particularly mind.

“Let’s head off, we should run into the cleanup crew on the way and we’ll fill them in.” Tiger said and they took off into the trees, heading for Konoha. She was not looking forward to dealing with the screaming agony in the limb for the entire trip.

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Sakura was lucky and her arm was pieced back together and healed fairly easily, the magical ninja powers of this world making flesh wounds a half hour procedure with a competent medic rather than the months of pain and suffering it would have been in Tristan’s old

world. The only real difficulty they experienced was when they came across pulverised bones, organ damage or the myriad of genetic diseases the population held.

She did gain a wicked, distinctly bite shaped scar from the whole ordeal, however.

(She did not get anytime to admire said scar as Tiger immediately launched her into evasion drills until she dropped.)

Chapter End Notes

Bonus Cuckoo fact:

Some types of cuckoo will plant their egg in other bird's nests and come back to check on it periodically. If they find that the other bird has found their egg and evicted it they will precede to ransack the nest, destroying it and killing all of the other bird's unhatched young. There are a few schools of thought as to why this is, but my favourite hypothesis is the mafia theory. Essentially, the idea is that these cuckoos work in a similar manner as the mafia. Didn't pay up on time? Break their kneecaps, they won't miss the next payment. Didn't take care of an unfamiliar child dumped in their midsts? Kill all of their babies and break their stuff, they'll look after your next unwanted kid.

time flies when you're too tired for higher brain functions

Chapter Summary

she blue and she go fast

Every breath through Sakura's lungs burned. Every bone in her body felt like splinters digging further into her flesh with every footfall on the pavement. Her muscles were brittle husks, eating themselves from the inside out and making her movements jerky and ungraceful.

Still, she ran.

She had three more laps around the village to do before she could rest.

Sakura had lost count of the days since she'd begun the descent to hell. She had lost track of the missions, lost track of the time and lost track of her progress. All she knew was when the next break was. How far she had to go before she could sleep.

Her feet hit the pavement. The goal grew a little closer.

A figure caught up from behind her and slowed, a lazy slouch matching her clumsy steps.

"There is a third option Tenzō didn't tell you about." Hatake drawled.

Sakura made a confused whine in response.

"You could stop using your elemental release, disappear back into the ranks and enjoy a comfortable career as one of the many." He said. Feverish green eyes snapped to his lone grey. Sakura's lips pulled back into a snarl.

"If you think I'm just going to sit back and stagnate then you don't know anything about me." She hissed between wheezing breaths. "There are *monsters* coming and I refuse to be *weak* and let them play with *my* village."

Hatake sighed. "I figured you'd say something like that." He scratched his chin, looking up to the sky. "I've got quite a bit more free time now that our forces are slowly getting back to normal. I'll be taking over your morning training slots from tomorrow. Meet at the usual

training ground at sunrise.”

The man sped away. Sakura wheezed and sped up her pace.

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“First lesson. DODGE!” Hatake flickered out of existence and reappeared in front of her, a fist flying towards her face. She leapt backwards, just narrowly avoiding the hit, only for him to immediately appear in her space again, this time with a kick towards her ribs.

They continued from sunrise- Hatake had shockingly showed up only ten minutes late- to well after lunchtime, the man only letting off when Gekkō appeared to collect her. By the end of the day her body was more bruise than skin.

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“The body has three hundred and sixty one tenketsu. You are going to learn to release chakra from all of them.”

-

“I am going to work out all my frustrations from spending the previous night drowning in paperwork up to my eyeballs! You are going to survive! Got it, brat?!”

“Hai, shishou-oba-saAAH”

“SURVIVE!”

“Aaaahh!!!”

-

Sakura was deep in the land of Earth, trailing a team of eight shinobi. With them was her target, a powerful earth user with a significant amount of money paying for his head. She wore nothing to link her to a village, instead she was clad in basic shinobi black with hair, skin and eyes changed to the same shade of black.

Her only defining feature was the pale scars on her cheek and the electric blue streak of her chokutō.

She darted through the trees and sliced through two of the Iwa shinobi in an instant, launching herself at a third only to be forced to

abandon the movement to dodge a trio of shuriken.

Dripping blue crackled over her, giving her full body a faster movement speed, greater strength and lightning fast reflexes.

She fainted sideways, pulling her blade mid movement and twirling in the other direction, slicing through the stomach of a shinobi behind her. She ran and took a running leap onto another shinobi's shoulders, avoiding the hand that rose out of the ground. She pushed forward in a burst of pressurised chakra, the man's shoulder and half his chest exploding beneath her feet, and she flew through the air, spinning in a whirl of blue as she headed for her target.

A wall of earth appeared in her way and she twisted midair and landed on the wall with her feet, wasting no time in throwing herself over the thing and sending her chokutō flying towards the man's face. He dodged, jerking backwards and she flicked her sword towards him again, only to back out at the last second as another shinobi launched themselves from her right flank.

She rolled under a tantō and leapt into a sanding position, sending a pulse of chakra out of her feet with the movement and smashing the surrounding ground into pieces, crushing the shinobi beneath her who's hand had been once again reaching for her foot.

The tantō shinobi lost their footing and she darted in, finishing them with a slash through the femoral artery.

Her smile ached in her cheeks.

Sakura threw herself up and spun through the volley of kunai thrown from her left, taking one to the shin but avoiding the rest. In a blur of movement her arm shot out a kunai of her own. There was a satisfying thunk of blade in flesh.

A wave of earth rose from the direction of her target, forming itself into a dragon and gaping maw launching at her. Sakura just barely slipped under the snapping jaws and punched through its neck. It exploded and a haze of dust settled through the air. She pushed into a sprint, trusting her hearing to direct her and skidded to a halt crouched behind her target, index and ring finger pressed against the middle of his shoulder blades, middle finger held back by her thumb.

She flicked. A precise, cone shaped burst of pressurised chakra hit the target. His ribcage exploded outwards, the man's internal organs turned to mush.

The dust settled.

Sakura drew herself back up to standing and sent her blade through the target's neck. She caught the head. Held it up by the blonde mane of hair as the body crashed to the ground.

A shinobi launched herself at Sakura, sending a mouthful of water bullets flying through the air. Sakura dodged two, took one to her right shoulder and put her chokutō through the woman's heart.

A final shinobi- clutching a kunai wound in his bicep- turned tail and ran.

Sakura eyed the setting sun. She could catch the mouse, but she had to be back in Konoha in time for training in the morning.

Sakura sealed the head, took a moment to look at the kunai buried in her shin and decided not to touch it.

It wasn't bleeding much and it only made her brain white out from pain if she bent her foot the wrong angle. Considering it was definitely buried in the bone, she'd let the medics handle it.

A quick bandage around her shoulder and she was off. Only stopping to slip on her grey armoured vest and Sparrow mask before just heading into Konoha's ANBU medical back entrance.

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"Sign here." The Hokage snapped. Sakura signed.

"What's this about?" She asked and just received a glare in return.

"Congrats, brat." The Hokage said, throwing a storage scroll at Sakura once she had signed the papers. "Now get out, I'm busy!"

Sakura caught it and left. She found a nearby seat and unsealed the scroll. On her lap appeared a brand new flak jacket, hitai-ate, and shinobi ID. She blinked down at the ID.

It read jōnin.

Sakura resealed the scroll, tucked it into a pocket, and made a mental note to think about it later. Then, she went to training.

-

“Just let me show you a little!”

“I don’t want to be a medical ninja.”

“Come on, you can’t have that kind of chakra control and *not* learn.”

“I do not want to be a medical ninja.”

“Just, look I’ll show you how to stop major bleeding at least. Just enough to get someone to a hospital if they’ve lost a limb or something.”

“...fine, but I am not going to become a medical ninja.”

-

Kumo and Iwa Bingo books were passed to her, both open to almost identical pages.

A black figure with an electric blue chakra sword and three white scars on her cheek.

A-rank shinobi, approach with caution, fifteen million ryo bounty.

-

“Sakura?!” A panicked voice came from above her. Sakura blinked her eyes open to see a head of blonde and the soft green glow of medical chakra.

“Shishou-oba-san?” Sakura slurred. The blonde shifted and pale blue-green eyes appeared instead of the expected caramel.

“I-I what?” The Yamanaka said before shaking her head. “It’s Yamanaka Ino, just work on staying calm for me.”

Sakura nodded and turned her head, taking in the panicked faces of the Nara and the Akimichi. “What happened?” She asked, her voice sounding stronger and her head clearing further by the second.

“We saw you collapse and just... not move again.” The Nara sounded shaken. “Asuma’s gone to get someone from the hospital.”

“You died!” Yamanaka sniffed. “Your heart stopped beating. I gave you emergency CPR and managed to restart it but you were dead. Physically, legally dead!”

“Aah.”

“Why were you dead?” The Nara interjected. She blinked up at him.

“Training.”

“Training.” He deadpanned.

“Mhm, training.”

“I don’t think you should be doing anymore of that training, Sakura.” The Akimichi said worriedly, Sakura beamed up at the kid.

“You’re too nice, Choji-kun!”

“I don’t think not wanting to someone to die from overworking themselves constitutes ‘too nice!’” Yamanaka interjected, her face increasingly more disturbed looking. “You should not be this calm after dying!”

“Ah well, we all have to go sometime.” Sakura giggled. “I am also on only six percent chakra reserves.” She raised a hand in the air, ignoring the screaming pain in her body as she did so, and wiggled her fingers. “I always go a bit loopy below eight, you know?”

“No! We don’t know! And you shouldn’t know!” The Yamanaka shrieked.

“Oi! Pinky! Did you actually croak it?” Cried a familiar voice lacking the familiar distortion.

“Mo-EITO!” She called as the familiar mop of sandy blonde hair poked the Yamanaka aside, taking over the glowing green with one hand whilst the other directed the girl to prep Sakura for an injection. “It’s horrible to see you, my man.”

“Rude.” The man spat, taking the prepped needle from the Yamanaka and jamming into the crook of her elbow.

“You could be a little gentle.” Sakura whined.

“God no. Do you know how much money you just lost me?”

“I’m flattered, Eito-kun!” She smiled. “Since I’m your superior now you *have* to tell me who won the bet!”

“Yūgao won with a bet on death then resuscitation, Itsuki lost with

just death.”

“I’m going to kill him.”

“If you do so before April I win a shitload of money from Tenzō.”

“No way! Tenzō bets?”

“Yep, don’t let the good boy persona fool you, I’ve seen that guy blow through a whole S-rank paycheck in one night at Tanzaku Quarters.”

“That’s more than a paper ninja’s entire salary.”

“To be fair we had run three of them that month.”

Sakura hissed as the drugs hit, pushing through her system in a wave of pain and chakra boosts. It felt a little like being boiled from the inside out and she felt a flicker of panic as she was reminded of the last time she’d felt like that. The time where she’d *actually* turned inside out.

“There you go, nice and not dying.” Money said distractedly, patting her face with one hand as he ran his other, medical green hand up and down her body, searching for damage.

“Does this mean I get a break?” She asked weakly.

“Traditionally you’d get a week off, but you have a mission in three days so you have until then, I guess.”

Sakura sighed. “Ah, blissful vacation, how I’ve missed you.”

“Come on brat, on your feet, I have actual patients to see.” He growled, yanking her to her feet with an arm.

“Who knew you were an actual doctor, I thought the whole green hand thing was just a neat party trick.” She said as she caught herself on a tree, working on finding an equilibrium again. A hand cuffed her on the back of her head.

“Don’t mouth off at your medic, brat!” Monkey called as he walked away.

“Don’t hit your superiors!” She yelled after him, finally managing to get her feet under her. Sakura looked over to where the ino-shika-cho trio were whispering furiously, the Sarutobi looming behind them with his eyebrows in his hairline. Sakura smiled and bowed. “Thank

you for saving my life, could I take you all out to barbecue as a token of my appreciation?"

"I could go for barbecue." The Akimichi (unsurprisingly) replied. The Nara nodded.

"I'm on a diet." The Yamanaka said. Sakura blinked at her. A kunoichi? On a diet? Sakura had to eat until she was full to bursting at every meal to keep up with her energy demands and yet the blonde wasn't an emaciated stick. Did she just never train? Sakura eyed Yamanaka's thinly callused hands and unscarred skin.

She just never trained.

"That's settled then!" Sarutobi said with a grin and each hand dropped onto a shoulder. "To barbecue!"

"Alright! Training made me hungry." Sakura said with a smile and a skip in her step, falling in next to the group.

"Training made you dead." The Yamanaka muttered dejectedly. Sakura couldn't help the soft snort made. Nara gave her a side eye but no one else seemed to notice.

The barbecue restaurant was fairly empty, the lunch rush having abated and the dinner having not yet started, so they got a good sized table and were served fairly quickly. In no time at all, the mouthwatering scent of cooking meat was wafting over the table and Sakura's stomach was rumbling.

She was sat on the inside of the booth, with the Nara next to her and the Yamanaka, Akimichi and Sarutobi across from them.

"I heard you two got promoted! You guys totally crushed the exam!" Sakura said with a beaming grin and the Akimichi blushed whilst the Yamanaka puffed up proudly.

"We did." She said. "All eight of the original group of genin were promoted."

"Congratulations on your promotion too, Sakura." Said the Akimichi.

"Thank you, though I don't know how everyone in the village already knows about it."

"You're a clanless, fourteen year old kunoichi promoted to jōnin, of

course everyone knows.” The Nara said in between mouthfuls.

“And you were trained under Kakashi, that’s automatically put a spotlight on you.” Sarutobi added.

“Ah well, I’ve just been lucky with the opportunities I received.” She said with a light flush on her cheeks. The Yamanaka snorted.

“People who are just lucky don’t train themselves to death.” She muttered, Sakura ignored it.

“What was the chūnin exam like, anyway? Was it very different?”

Akimichi latched onto the conversation topic, describing Suna’s maze stage with a note of excitement in his voice. Sakura noticed the other members of the team relaxing as he talked and continued poking him into different conversation strains.

-

“Kakashi-sensei, why are you in my house?” Sakura said, pausing the towel on top of her head mid motion to instead stare at the man. “I’m almost certain I have the morning off.”

“Maa, Sakura-chan, you say that like I’m someone suspicious! I’m hurt!”

“I’m going to go make breakfast, then.” Sakura deadpanned, heading into the kitchen to forget about the world for a few more minutes. She returned with two bowls of eggplant miso and cutlery, dumping one in front of where he was sitting at her table, customary porn in hand.

He blinked down at the bowl and raised an eyebrow at her.

“Did you not want food?” Sakura looked down and took a mouthful of her own, glancing up again to find half his bowl missing and Hatake nonchalantly reading.

“Did you know this was my favourite?” Hatake drawled and Sakura snorted.

“I did, but I also just happened to be having it for breakfast today.” She said. He blinked and she pointed her spoon at him. “You’re not the only person in the world who enjoys eggplant.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” He said with an entirely serious expression. Sakura laid her head on the table, a hand over her mouth

as she furiously tried to stifle laughter.

It was too early for this shit.

Sakura pulled herself into a respectable human being and prepared herself to finish her breakfast like a decent shinobi, only to thump her head back on the table and clap a hand to her mouth to stifle giggles again at the sight of a bright pink cupcake where her breakfast used to be.

Sakura made an executive decision to stay face down on the table.

"I never should have woken up this morning." Sakura said, drooping further into the table. "I should have slept in, but no. First free morning in weeks and I want wake up early to spend a couple of hours looking through archives."

She looked up again, a truly despairing expression on her face at the sight of the bizarrely pink cupcake still sitting there and Hatake still reading porn in her dining room.

"What the fuck, sensei." She whispered, emphatically and with great feeling. A sole eye looked up at her and blinked slowly, raised to the sky and then lowered back to the book. He turned a page and raised his unoccupied hand, not looking away from the porn, and waved it in a lazy jazz hand.

"Happy birthday." He drawled. Sakura abruptly straightened.

"Wait what?" The words popped out before she could stop them.

"It's your birthday. Why do you think you got the morning off?"

"Isn't it like January?"

"It's almost the end of March."

"Oh, man, I'm already fifteen. Time flies so quickly when it's blurred together from pain." Sakura mumbled. She looked down at the cupcake and brightened. "Then is this for me?"

"Aah."

"I would share but you don't like sweets anyway." Sakura said, dipping a finger in the frosting and popping it in her mouth, savouring the flavour of raspberries.

(How did everyone already know her favourite flavour? Sakura had only remembered having raspberries once or twice in this lifetime. Were they just choosing based off the pink?)

She glanced up to see Hatake staring at her intently, his brow furrowed. "How do you even know that?"

Her head tilted. Her mouth opened in a surprised 'oh'.

"Do you ever interact with the civilian side of things?" She asked.

"Not really." Hatake said. She nodded, it made sense, he barely interacted with the shinobi side of Konoha, let alone civilians.

"Right so shinobi in Konoha know how fucking weird you are, right?" She explained and he looked mildly offended but nodded. "Civilians don't see that. To all the unfulfilled civilian mums out there you're just a mysterious, probably good looking, powerful and wealthy figure." Hatake was looking more and more disturbed as he talked, wilting behind the icha novel. "I've been working those gossip rounds for information gathering since I was five. I knew enough about you before jōnin selections to know you'd be our sensei, to bring three hours of reading material for the wait, to ignore basically everything you say, the days and times you're typically seen in the market and that you're blood type O."

Hatake closed the porn with a decisive thump and eye smiled at her. "And that's why you got an A!" He said cheerily before disappearing in a swirl of leaves.

Sakura considered being a responsible house owner and cleaning them for a moment before decisively returning to the cupcake.

When she finally made it to archives she had a skip in her step and a smile on her face. Today, she was reading everything she could get her hands on about the Uzumaki's birth.

(Five weeks later and another anonymous, colour-coded, labelled, and systematically itemised binder- this time with her findings about the Nine Tails attack not just being a random act of god and quite likely linked to the eventual massacre of the Uchiha clan- made it's way onto the Hokage's desk within a stack of paperwork.)

Chapter Summary

Chiyo proves that the quickest way to make Sakura detest someone for life is to attack Kakashi.

There was glitter in her hair and a pile of little black books on her lap, each bookmarked with strips of cardboard decorated with drawings of kittens. Shiranui was next to her, head thrown back against the lounge cushions as he laughed. The surrounding jōnin ignored them- except for maybe Yūhi, who Sakura could feel glaring at the back of her head- with practiced ease, only the few newbies unaccustomed to their antics.

“If I get murdered because I left a trail of glitter behind on my next assassination I will come back from the grave just to make your life miserable.” Sakura complained, opening the first of the books and blinking numbly down at the page for a moment.

A-rank, approach with caution, twenty five million ryo bounty. A black figure with her chokutō and her scars.

“Nah, you don’t have anything covert for at least a week.” Shiranui shot back, finally calming down from his laughing fit. Her lips pinched and she opened the next bingo book, shutting it almost immediately as she saw an identical ranking.

“Do I want to know how you know that?”

“I mean Takeo really likes it when I do this thing with my tong-”

“Right!” Sakura cut him off, emphasising the move by clapping the third bingo book shut. It was yet another completely ridiculous bounty on her head, even if she’d thankfully managed to keep them from connecting her disguised appearance with her real one. Sakura wasn’t quite sure how she’d deal with going from constantly exploiting being underestimated to recognised and feared. “As much as I love hearing about your sexual exploits I currently have some more pressing concerns.”

“You’re just jealous you can’t compete with my title as the gossip king yet.”

"I don't have to be a slut to do that." She snorted, lifting the final book.

"And yet you don't know what's in that one." He pointed to the small book and she shot him a glare. She couldn't help the sharp intake of air through her nose when she looked down to the open page, however, and she could practically hear the smug grin Shiranui donned in response.

"Kumo?" She asked tiredly, eyes tracing over the information without really absorbing it.

"Kumo." He confirmed.

Apparently Kumogakure had taken her frequent forays into the Land of Lightning personally.

It was hardly Sakura's fault that an extremely high percentage of the country's population were natural sensors, meaning that a usual infiltration into it required highly expensive and time consuming to produce specialised gear, leading to her abilities making her the only Konoha shinobi capable of pulling off such missions cheaply and quickly. And because the missions were so difficult, they paid *really* well.

She hardly deserved the S-rank, 'kill on sight' and forty million ryo bounty. They'd dubbed her the 'Null-Storm'- a flattering comparison to the second Tsuchikage- and labelled her a user of the 'kekkei-genkai' called storm release. Considering how much she looked like both her parents she very much doubted it was a bloodline limit, but storm was a good enough name as any, she supposed.

Sakura sighed. Shiranui had won. She really had been dropping the ball if she'd had to be *told* she had an S-rank in a bingo book.

"It's been a tiring two years." She pouted, the defence sounding weak even to her ears.

"Well you'll have plenty of opportunities to beat me soon."

"What does that mean?" She asked, eyes narrowed suspiciously. Shiranui waved a hand at her dismissively before pointing to a recently promoted tokubetsu jōnin in the corner.

"Never mind that, what do you think of the fresh meat." He said, leering unashamedly at the poor man's ass.

"I don't know why Raidō puts up with you."

"Puts up with me? Pinky, sweetheart, Raidō joins in."

-

Sakura's training stopped rather suddenly. She simply walked into team Ro room one day to yet another burst of confetti and ridiculous decorations. A golden party hat was slipped on her head as she read the 'You're leaving for now!' banner.

She tilted her head.

"I'm leaving?" She asked. And Tiger nodded.

"You're getting reassigned." He said.

"Reassigned?"

"Nevermind that! We have cake!" Cat cried, slipping an arm over her shoulders and dragging her over to the conference table. "Your training ends today so we're celebrating!"

"My training is ending?" She asked, feeling increasingly confused and a little frustrated. This was the kind of thing that really shouldn't be a mystery if she'd been doing the necessary legwork in her gossip circuits.

"You'll have better things to do, but they're a surprise!" Cat nodded.

"It's not like you really need it anymore anyway." Panda added.

"There's not much that can kill you once you've got an S-rank in the book."

"But that doesn't mean I can just stop training."

"Of course not!" Tiger said as he pulled over a chalkboard. "That's why we're here!"

He started scribbling over the surface and a piece of cake was pushed in front of her. Sakura stared wide eyed at the board as yet another ridiculously intricate training schedule was written up.

(The cake was raspberry and dark chocolate. It was delicious.)

"You see we've devised something that will work on easing your body into only training normal amounts per week..."

-

The next day she found herself just a little hungover and with nothing but free time on her hands.

She donned a wildly impractical blue shirt and white skirt (over a protective layer of ninja fishnet, she wasn't that laid back about her clothing choices), strapped on her familiar weapons pouches and chokutō and tied her hitai-ate across her forehead. Her pink hair fell in loose waves over her shoulders as she set off to wander the village without the threat of training or the next mission hanging over her head for the first time in months.

Soon, she found the Hokage.

"I'm just saying, surely there's a way you could teach me to heal hangovers without the years of studying." She needled the woman. "You are the legendary slug princess, are you not?"

"You should know better than anyone how much hard work that precise level of chakra control requires. Not to mention that the brain is an incredibly complex part of your body, one wrong move from misinformation and you're dead!"

Sakura sighed. "It was worth a shot."

"You would have made a damn fine medical ninja if you weren't such a jōnin, Haruno." The Hokage chuckled. Sakura felt her brow furrow.

"What does that even mean?"

"All jōnin are complete weirdo's, Brat. Medic-nin need to be competent human beings." The Senju told her, face serious.

"What about you then?" Sakura replied and the woman clapped her on the back- no doubt leaving bruises from her monstrous strength- as she laughed.

"There's an exception to every rule!"

"Sa-Sakura-chan?" An oddly familiar and yet unfamiliar voice called from behind her. She turned, one eyebrow raised quizzically, only for her eyes to widen in surprise at the sight of the orange blob behind her.

"Naruto!" She said, an only mostly manufactured excited grin pulling

at her lips. "You've barely changed. Though..." her eyes narrowed and she took three decisive strides until she was standing before him. Her hand pressed on the flat of her head and moved forward, stopping just under the Uzumaki's mouth. She drooped. "Everyone's tall but me."

"Don't worry, Sakura-chan, you're still pretty even if your tiny." He laughed and she snorted.

"Of course, of course." She tucked her hair behind an ear before throwing a glare at the white haired Sannin standing next to the Hokage and leaning in to faux-whisper. "Hey, Naruto, travelling around with that old pervert, he didn't try any funny business, did he? No leaving you with dangerous ruffians or taking advantage of your general naivety?"

"Mhm, I don't think so? He did force me to edit his new book, though, so that was pretty annoying." The Uzumaki said matter of factly and entirely oblivious to the steel that was pooling in her eyes.

"Oh, really? It wouldn't happen to be the book Kashi-sensei is so desperately trying to ignore us in favour of reading, would it?"

"Yep! That's the one!"

"And do you like the book?"

"Nah, its pretty boring." The Uzumaki said seriously. Sakura pat his shoulder and turned a far to sweet smile on the white haired Sannin.

"Looks like you just scrape by, Ero-sennin!" She said cheerfully. The man frowned down at her.

"I am the great Jiraiya, toad sage extraordinaire! I don't just scrape by anything!" He loudly proclaimed, throwing his hands into a wild pose. She tilted her head innocently.

"Isn't your entire career a series of just scraping by?" She asked, causing the Sannin to wilt.

"Naruto-nii-chan!" A voice cried and they turned to see the moderately sized Honourable Grandson standing before the group. Upon catching their attention the kid sped through a series of hand signs and turned into an extremely busty naked lady, swirls of steam covering his newly feminine privates.

Sakura supposed it wasn't a bad strategy if you're opponent was

twelve and extremely hormonal, though it would be more likely the shock factor to work than anything else. Shinobi were very quickly acclimated against caring too much about nudity. Her eyes slid to the very flustered looking Sannin and his over the top antics.

Somehow, she didn't think it would actually work on him in battle.

"How was that! A real drool of jutsu, wasn't it!" The kid cried, popping back into his original form.

"Konohamaru, sorry, but I'm not a kid anymore. From now on you shouldn't use that ninjutsu either." Uzumaki said. Sakura felt a moment of pure shock that maybe he had matured very, very differently from what she expected. Then he dissolved into a yelling match over perverted ninjutsu with the kid and all was right with the world once more.

Sakura looked towards the Hokage and pointed. "It's three generations of ero-sennin."

She grimaced. "Naruto has grown more and more like you in these past two years, hasn't he Jirayia?"

The Sannin chuckled nervously in response.

"Right, the nostalgia ends here though. Kakashi." The Hokage said and Hatake closed his book with a snap.

"Well it has been a while, hasn't it?" He hummed and slipped the book away. "From now on the two of you will come with me on team-related missions." He said and Sakura felt her mystery 'reassignment' abruptly make sense. It was a brilliant ploy to both give in to the people involved's sentimentalism whilst also assigning a second ANBU trained jōnin to protect the jinchūriki. "It's different than before. It's no longer teacher and pupil. Starting today, we're equal Konoha shinobi."

A gloved hand dangled two bells before them.

"Well, I am curious as to how you've developed."

The Uzumaki cheered and Hatake led them to the original team seven training ground. Sakura found herself smiling. She loved her ANBU work but there was something to be said for the sheer level of ridiculousness that tended to hit Team Seven. They stopped before the three posts. She twisted her hair into a senbon-secured bun.

“The rules are the same as before. No matter how, try to get the bells from me. If you don’t come at me with the intent to kill, you will never succeed in getting the bells. For Sakura, the transparency jutsu and henge is banned.” He said sternly and she pouted. “You have until sunrise tomorrow.”

“Why does she have banned jutsus?” Naruto asked, pointing at her and frowning.

“He wants to get a full idea of our abilities.” Sakura laughed. “Not a knife in his back.”

“Aah, Sakura has become a silent assassination expert. I would likely not get away from her without serious wounds if she were to sneak up on me.” Hatake added.

“I think I get it.” Nodded the Uzumaki. “This place is nostalgic.” He said, wistful eyes looking over the surroundings.

“Yeah.”

“This is where you first trained, isn’t it?” Hatake said.

“The three man team...” Uzumaki murmured.

“Sasuke was around then, too.”

The Uzumaki slid to the ground, radiating absolute despair. Sakura raised an eyebrow at Hatake and he looked back incredulously.

A hand clapped the book shut and Uzumaki perked up in a pavlovian response ingrained during their genin days.

“Well then, shall we begin?”

“You won’t do it while reading a book this time, Kakashi-sensei?” Uzumaki taunted.

“You scared?” Sakura added.

“I think I should save the enjoyment for later. Besides, this time I get the feeling I should take it a little seriously too.” He said and slid up the forehead protector, tomoes whirling slowly. Sakura’s grin widened and she shifted into a defensive stance.

Naruto threw a barrage of shuriken that Hatake ducked and responded with his own. Sakura skittered her way to the outskirts of the conflict

and settled in to watch. This was just as much about her learning the Uzumaki's capacities as Hatake learning them, after all.

Uzumaki jumped Hatake's shuriken, only to be faced with a second, higher wave. In a flash he spawned a shadow clone that pulled the real Uzumaki out of the projectile's way and Sakura's eyebrow rose. That was an unconventional move. The clone hinged into a giant shuriken only for Hatake to appear behind him and trap him in with the blade at the back of his neck. A mimic of their first bell test, only this time another clone of Uzumaki's held a kunai to Hatake's back.

Uzumaki really had gotten smarter.

"Well, your haste hasn't changed." Hatake drawled. "Alright start!" He promptly disappeared. Sakura's eyes swept around the training ground and she smiled. Jumped into the middle of the clearing.

Smashed chakra-enhanced feet into the ground. The earth exploded. She smiled at Hatake's head between the rocks.

"Hiya!"

He landed on top a large chunk of rock. "Alright, this time I should also do something on my end."

Sakura and Uzumaki shared a glance and then they were both launching forward. Uzumaki created a series of clones and moved to flank Hatake as Sakura flooded her body with her nature transformation, the pulsing licks of blue setting her alight and making everything faster, stronger.

Kakashi sped through hand signs too fast for her to see and a ring of earth senbon rose and launched at them in a blur. Sakura ducked into the gap between two slabs of rock, sliding through the space and popping back up once the senbon had passed. She immediately had to dodge a kick to the head and kill her momentum, but she was saved from further attacks by Naruto appearing behind Kakashi.

Sakura slipped forward and got her hand on a bell just as the man took a rasengan to the back and disappeared into a puff of smoke. She breathed sharply through her nose, eyes and ears searching for some sign of Kakashi.

This was going to be a long fight.

Sakura was panting next to Uzumaki as they hid behind a tree, a helpless grin on her face. She wasn't going all out- couldn't if she wasn't really aiming to kill- but this was more about Uzumaki anyway.

"If we could somehow stop him using both hands we could get to the bells." She said.

"Yeah but Kakashi-sensei's unreasonable strong."

"The sharingan drains too much chakra, so we could just wait it out, but he'd probably be expecting that which would make it hard to pull off."

"Ah! I got it!" The Uzumaki cried, leaning in to explain the plan to her and she laughed.

It worked in the end. Hatake fell to his knees and they both held a bell, the Uzumaki ending the match in the most unpredictable way possible.

-

"You've become strong, huh?" Hatake drawled as they wondered into town, all bruised and battered from the long fight. "I'm amazed you were actually able to get the bells."

"Maybe I've even surpassed you, Kakashi-sensei!" Uzumaki said as he strutted along next to them.

"Maybe give it a few more years, Naruto." Sakura interjected.

"Haha! But anyway, I'm still young, an-"

"Are you sure, sensei?" Sakura teased. "Aren't you turning thirty this year?" Her eyes widened in mock horror. "Wasn't the Sandaime thirty five when he died?"

The look he shot her was entirely deadpan.

"We haven't gotten Ichiraku ramen yet!" The Uzumaki cried and Sakura nodded seriously.

"We should go, it'll be Kakashi's treat!" She grinned and he cheered.

"Sorry, I have to create and submit a list of formations for the new teams. So it's goodbye for now." Hatake vanished.

“Ah! He disappeared!”

“Cheap.” Sakura snorted. “Come on Naruto, I’ll shout us lunch.”

“Is this like a da-”

“No.” She said firmly and he wilted. “Hey, Shikamaru, Temari-san!” Sakura called, waving at the approaching pair. She felt a sour flash of jealous as she noticed that the Suna girl was taller than all of them.

“Hey! If it isn’t Naruto!” The Nara called, clearly easily recognised the mix of blonde and orange. “Did you just come home then?”

“No, I came back yesterday.”

“Has any of your idiocy left you? Have you changed well?”

“He’s gotten smarter in combat but somehow hasn’t seemed to have actually matured.” Sakura interjected with a thoughtful frown. The Uzumaki did a strange combination of radiating happiness and wilting. “What are you guys up to?”

“There’s a chūnin exam soon. I’m going back and forth between the Sand and the Leaf for meetings.” The Suna girl said.

“It’s troublesome but I’ve become an examiner so I was told to go and see off messengers from the Sand.”

“A chūnin exam? That brings back memories.” Uzumaki said.

“Yeah and Naruto, what are you planning?” The Nara asked.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a chūnin exam. The only person who hasn’t become a chūnin from our class is you.”

“EHHHH?” Uzumaki screamed. “Even the annoying idiot?!”

“Yep, Kiba did really well in the exams.” Sakura said, having spent the required hours listening to the Uzumaki’s babbling to decipher his insults.

“Plus.” Shikamaru said and pointed at Sakura. “Sakura, Neji from the class above us, Kankurou of the Sand and Temari are already jōnin.”

“Ah! Sakura, you’re a jōnin?!” Uzumaki said.

“Yep!” She grinned. “I was promoted just over a year ago now!”

“Congratulations!” He beamed back at her earnestly before whipping his head around to stare at the Nara. “What about Gaara?”

“He’s the Kazekage.” The Nara said.

“No way!!!”

-

“The Sand’s Kazekage has been taken by an organisation called Akatsuki! We just received the message!” The decoder yelled, having thrown herself bodily into the office in her haste.

“Right.” The Hokage said, adapting to the situation rapidly. “Team Kakashi, I’ll tell you your new mission. You are to go immediately to the Sand, find out the situation and relay it to Konoha. After that follow the orders of the Sand and back them up.”

Sakura’s mind whirled. If the Kazekage was taken from inside the village then...

“Can we please take a medic-nin with us?” She asked and the Senju raised an eyebrow at her. “If Gaara was taken from the village there are likely a large amount of casualties and Suna is not known for their quality of hospitals. If competent shinobi are being held up by otherwise treatable wounds...”

“Fair enough.” The woman said. “You can take Shizune, but she is there in the capacity as a medic only.” She gestured to the woman sitting to her right, the brunette squeaking and rushing to stand. “Ino and I will survive without her.”

“Thank you, Shishou-oba-sama.” Sakura replied with a slightly mocking bow and the Hokage scowled.

“Get out, you brat!”

Team Kakashi plus the Hokage’s assistant hurriedly left the room.

They gathered outside the gates as fast as possible. Of the four, Sakura reached the meeting spot only after Hatake. Both of them ANBU trained to do fast turn arounds but Hatake with the ridiculous amount of chakra to be able to shunshin everywhere. She glowered at the smug eye smile he sent and vowed to figure out how to travel large

distances faster. Naruto appeared next, with the brunette medic appearing alongside the Hokage and Umino soon after.

The Uzumaki was dressed in his orange jumpsuit, but the rest of the four-man group were clad in practical shinobi black and their flak jackets. Sakura had tied her hair into braids and knotted them at the top of her head as she'd run over, in deference to the Suna heat and likely S-rank fights.

"Well... off we go." Uzumaki said and Sakura waved as they turned to go as a group.

A mane of white hair appeared in front of them and she had to resist the urge to draw her chokutō. She then proceeded to watch the Sannin have 'secret' whispering sessions with a series of people that Sakura did not need her enhanced hearing to make out every word of, and then wave them off with a ridiculous pose and a worried frown.

Finally, they launched into the treetops and towards Sand, only stopping to pick up Temari on the way.

The group arrived in Sunagakure in record time for a team with a genin on it, the Uzumaki proving his ridiculous stamina and pushing them harder than they probably should have. Sakura was panting but she took a moment to send a filthy glance at Hatake, the man looked entirely unruffled despite the pace. He sent a smug eye smile back and she felt an eyebrow twitch.

It was hardly her fault. For all her training her body was still only fifteen, and her size made everything except agility twice as hard.

"Temari-san was with you? We've been waiting, please this way!" Said a very spiky haired man, leading the five of them through the streets. "The Kazekage was abducted and after that Kankurou pursued them but he was wounded."

"What?! They got Kankurou too?!" The Suna girl cried.

"Yes and he was caught by the enemies poison and we have no way to neutralise it. At this rate, he has half a day at the most."

"Let's hurry, Termari-san." Said their medic. "I'll examine him."

They entered the sick room and the Hokage's assistant and the Suna girl raced forward. Sakura stepped inside the door and locked eyes on a tiny woman who was staring at Hatake in shock and unleashing

killing intent.

“The white fang of Konoha!” She growled and launched herself at him. The Uzumaki blocked her and sent her sliding. Sakura put on a burst of speed and rushed forwards to the woman’s side, chokutō at her stomach threateningly.

“The white fang has been dead for decades.” Sakura said, her voice low and dangerous, even as the Uzumaki was yelling behind her. “Take a closer look.”

“She’s right sister, there’s a strong resemblance but it’s not the white fang.” A nervous looking old man from the side added. The old woman’s eyes narrowed for a moment before widening dramatically.

“No way!! I was just pretending to be stupid!! Gyahahah!” She cried and Sakura sheathed her sword, to the apparent massive amount of relief of the battle ready Suna-nin around her. She turned her back on the woman- a massive snub after seeing her abilities- and went back to leaning against the wall. Watching the medic work with sharp eyes.

“You’re not normally this rude.” Hatake drawled next to her, his own eye carefully watching the surroundings.

“She deserved it.”

“Mhm, maybe but still.” He said. Sakura sighed.

“I’ll play nice so long as no one attacks any of us again.” She conceded and he nodded.

The Hokage’s assistant and the old lady were racing out of the room, the brunette only pausing to talk to Hatake before she left. “Wait for me, I won’t be going with you in the actual pursuit but I’ll make extra antidotes for you guys if I can.” Hatake nodded and she ran off.

“Let’s get going!” Uzumaki cried, throwing himself into a stretch in the centre of the room.

“Naruto, hold on a bit.” Hatake walked forward. “We are waiting for Shizune to return. But before that there is something I’d like to ask. What came of the pursuit of the Akastuki after that?”

“Kankurou went after them alone.” The veiled man replied. “There were no others.” Sakura’s brow furrowed. Was Kankurou the only one who had cared enough to follow, or were Suna’s forces just in that bad

of a shape?

She supposed they must have been, they'd lost far more men in the crush than Konoha did, after all.

"Then, have we completely lost them?" Hatake asked.

"Yes... we have." The Suna-nin at least had the grace to look ashamed about it.

"Mmm, well could you please show me to where Kankurou-kun was fighting?" Hatake said. "Though I might not seem like it I am an expert at pursuit, even if a small amount of their scent was left behind."

"That won't be necessary." Interrupted Kankurou himself, pushing himself up to sitting with trembling limbs. "There are two enemies, one abducted Gaara. You should follow Gaara's scent. Even assuming they split up, the other caught a bit of their clothing on Karasu's hand."

"Making a success from a failure. You are indeed a shinobi of the Sand."

"Kankurou, are you okay?" Uzumaki cried, supporting the sickly teen with a hand. "Hi!" He grinned at the teen's confused expression.

"Kankurou, are you actually sure that one of the two you followed was Sasori?" The old woman interrupted, appearing with the old man in tow.

"Chiyo-baa-sama and Ebizou-jii-sama?" Kankurou exclaimed.

"What about that... Kankurou?" The old man wheezed. The Hokage's assistant pushed past him, preparing a bottle of what was hopefully an antidote.

"Yeah, it was Sasori of the red sand, he said so himself." The teen replied and Sakura eyed the forlorn expression on the old woman's face. She had a bad feeling that was going to be problematic.

"Sasori of the red sand?" Hatake asked. "May we hear more about the Akatsuki? Please?"

"We don't know much." The veiled shinobi said. "But the one who took the Kazekage was a long range fighter who used bombs, and had

a giant bird he would fly on the back of. Sasori was one of our best puppeteers before he defected over twenty years ago. He was known as a genius model creator. And a heavy poison user.”

“Hatake-san.” The Hokage’s assistant murmured, passing the man two injectors. “They work by breaking down any poison in your system for three minutes, giving you a small window of immunity.” Hatake nodded and pocketed them.

“Alright, let’s go.” He said and the three of them followed the veiled shinobi to the gates. He paused just as they passed under the walls.

“If you wait a little, we can have a skilled shinobi too.”

“Really-?”

“I’m going too!” Cried the fan girl, running through the streets and Sakura nodded approvingly. The wind user would be a great asset.

“Temari! Stay here and work on the defence of the country border!” A voice cried from the battlements. Sakura looked up with a growing feeling of annoyance. The old woman was leaning over the edge. “From the shinobi of the Sand I’ll be more than enough.”

The veiled shinobi and the fan girl both protested but she silenced them.

“DON’T TREAT ME LIKE AN OLD WOMAN!” She screamed jumping off the battlements and landing between them. Sakura fought the urge to make a snippy, likely war-inducing comment about her very apparent senility. “I’ve wanted to give my cute grandson some love for a while now.”

At least there was some steel behind that. She may yet not be too emotionally compromised.

Hatake offered no comment on this turn of events and instead summoned the ninken and gave them orders, the eight dogs sniffing the scrap of cloth and splitting up in separate directions.

“Right, we’ll travel this way.” He pointed straight out from Suna. “Since that’s where they were heading, last they were seen. Once my ninken find the scent they’ll direct us.”

“Alright, let’s go!” Uzumaki cried and they broke into a sprint.

Mistreating Old People

Chapter Summary

Sometimes it's really inconvenient to have someone you care about the opinion of have such a strict moral code. Really, not killing a single comrade? Shouldn't Sakura at least get two freebies?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They travelled moved mostly in silence, with some scattered conversation.

“Naruto, did you encounter Akatsuki whilst you were training with Jiraiya?” Asked Sakura.

“No, not at all!” The Uzumaki replied.

“But they already went after you once, why not again?”

“Maybe it’s not to say that they chose not to, but that they couldn’t. Jiraiya-sama was always at his side.” Hatake added.

“From what I have gathered, I heard there were other reasons.” The old lady said. “It requires considerable preparation to separate a ‘tailed beast’ that is sealed within a man. I assume that’s what hampered their effort.”

“It would be easier to understand their motivations if we knew if the other jinchūriki had been captured. But the other nations wouldn’t tell us if they were.” Sakura sighed.

“It’s common sense not to reveal a weakness to a potential enemy.”

“Not when there’s a mercenary group filled with S-rank shinobi wandering around.” Sakura retorted. “The amount of power they would hold with all of the tailed beasts could level the elemental nations.”

“How many of us are there?” Uzumaki asked.

“You don’t even know that and you call yourself Jiraiya’s student?!”

The old woman said belligerently.

“The information regarding the nine tailed beasts is top secret in Konoha so...” Hatake said.

“Well, I suppose so. There are a total of nine tailed beasts in this world.” She said, her tone a haughty, nasal grating on Sakura’s ears. “Each beast differs in characteristics depending on the number of tails they have. Each possessing a number of tails according to their name. They are a monstrous form of chakra. During the great ninja war every village attempted to acquire the power for military purposes, competing to obtain these beasts. However, no one can control them beyond the ability of men. I don’t know why the Akatsuki are attempting to acquire them, it’s too dangerous.”

Sakura rolled her eyes as they settled back into silence. They were dealing with a group of S-rank missing-nin with aspirations to some as of yet unknown higher cause. The kind of prodigies treated like gods by their villages until their ego grew to big for the constraints of a military hierarchy and they killed their way out. Something as mundane as the knowledge that ‘it had never been done before’ or it was ‘beyond the power of men’ wouldn’t be a deterrent to that kind of personality. It would be a challenge.

A challenge Akatsuki could very well meet.

The tree line abruptly ended. The damp shade of the forest giving away to reveal gentle, rolling green fields and a clear blue sky. The air was pleasantly warm on Sakura’s skin and carried the crisp scents of spring.

Uchiha Itachi cut through the idyllic surroundings like a ghoulish spectre. The milky white of his skin stood in stark contrast to the black of his cloak, making him look pale and drawn as though the bright crimson of the clouds were his blood, haemorrhaging relentlessly from a corpse-like body and pooling in macabre patterns. The spin of the gleaming Sharingan was lazy. His face a picture of barely polite disinterest.

“Halt!” Hatake called and they landed on the flat, the four of them settling into a tense line before the Akastuki.

“Those eyes.” Murmured the old woman, her voice reverent with fear.

“Uchiha Itachi!” Uzumaki cried.

“Itachi. Ho, this is the child who killed his entire family?”

“It has been a while. Kakashi-san, Naruto-kun.” The Uchiha greeted, his voice tonelessly polite.

“You bastard!” Uzumaki growled, face twisting angrily. “NOT JUST ME BUT EVEN GAARA?!”

“Kakashi.” Sakura said, her gentle tone cutting through Uzumaki’s rant as she stepped forward. Hatake hummed unhappily but didn’t hesitate to step up next to her, a hand pushing up his hitai-ate. It went against her typical play of milking underestimation for all it’s worth- which she knew he’d prefer she did- playing the fool and the weakling until a kill shot opened up and she stepped in to easily take it, but Itachi was different. He carried a powerful name, sure, but he had lived most of his career as a knobbly kneed child. Small and frail and easy to dismiss on a battlefield. Sakura watched the flat, indiscriminate expression and did not expect him to underestimate her due to her height.

Or perhaps she just wanted to see him hurt by her hands. Pay back the sight of a too-still body and a report filled with descriptions of torture by ripping those pretty little eyes out with her teeth. Uchiha Itachi may not be the traitor he played but he was someone she craved to make bleed.

Itachi’s expression did not change, but his hands moved slowly upwards.

“Everyone!” Kakashi called, his own Sharingan beginning to whirl rapidly. “Don’t look directly at his eyes, its dangerous! Judge his movements from his body and feet, Itachi’s genjutsu is an eye jutsu, in other words it’s a vision type. You’ll be fine if you avoid eye contact.” She tuned out the following argument, instead focusing on the Uchiha before her.

Itachi held his hands in a seal over his face, likely gathering chakra for a genjutsu, and Sakura drew her chokutō from its sheath. She maintained eye contact even after Kakashi’s explanation and felt a slow smile stretch her face. Itachi expression did not change from the flat politeness, but his Sharingan spun just a little faster in response.

It was a risk, but a calculated one. The Sharingan gave the user perfect visual retention and allowed them to implant that information into their opponent’s own sight with genjutsu. The great flaw with the Sharingan was that it used the user’s information rather than the

opponent's. If Itachi made someone see a flower before them then it would appear exactly as Itachi had seen it through his human eyes. Any average human would never notice the difference, making it exceptionally powerful, but it also made it weak to people outside that metric. It's what made visual genjutsu on intelligent animals so difficult, their eyesight so different from a human's that the genjutsu would always look fake to them, no matter how perfect.

Sakura's eyes were more bird than human and her chakra control was unprecedented. Itachi may have the Mangekyou but its abilities were just a fire she couldn't dodge if she couldn't tell where it was aiming and a better genjutsu. She didn't fear it. She almost wanted him to use it against her, just to find out if she could break it.

On the flip side, her stealth techniques were useless against a Sharingan. They would have to win a frontal assault. Her grin was sharklike as electric blue chakra burst to life over her skin.

"We'll kindly ask you to come with us now, Naruto-kun." Itachi said dispassionately and pointed. The world turned flat to her eyes. Itachi's chakra seeped into her system, laser focused heat with the cloying aftertaste of burnt sugar. It was the work of half a thought to pull her chakra in the wrong direction for a moment and purge the invasive energy from her system. The world returned to normal and she launched forward alongside Kakashi.

His punch was blocked and he was sent flying back as she darted in from the side and slashed. Itachi blocked with a kunai and slid a half step back. Kakashi was out of range and Itachi's other hand was forming a sign for a jutsu she didn't know so Sakura latched onto the storm-spiced cycles of her chakra and pulled, forcing the manic speed to work as kinetic energy and shunt her just over ten metres backwards. The blue energy disappearing from around her.

Kakashi stood to her right and his second finger twitched. Sakura pushed her chakra back over her skin, the energy leaving her tenketsu points as storm and sinking back into another to change back to pure chakra. The returning chakra more manic than before, her system speeding faster and faster with each circuit over her body, hastening her very cells until every part of her operated at an ever increasing pace.

After five seconds of build up she would have enough speed to perform the short range body-flicker again. The chakra loss free system performing a chakra loss free jutsu but at the cost of her

movement abilities for a few precious moments. Something potentially fatal if the jutsu was used aggressively.

Sakura and Kakashi leapt forwards again but Itachi began speeding through hand signs faster than Sakura could differentiate them. A monstrous ball of fire was spat towards them and she shifted her momentum sideways as Kakashi disappeared under the ground. It was molten with heat, leaving her face burning like she'd held it under the midday summer sun.

A Kakashi shadow clone burst up from the ground at Itachi's feet and he threw himself backwards, catching clone-Kakashi's arm and shoving it off balance, sending a fist towards its face.

Sakura rushed forwards, as though attempting to flank the pair. Her system speeding up and up and up. The clone-Kakashi gripped Itachi's arms and held him in place. Five seconds had passed.

She flickered directly behind clone-Kakashi and didn't hesitate to bury her chokutō in its back all the way up to the hilt. The shadow clone popped in a burst of smoke and she couldn't help but frown as she came face to face with Itachi. There was no sign of pain in his expression despite the chakra laced sword buried through his heart.

Sakura pushed it deeper and twisted. Itachi smiled.

A man that was not Itachi slid backwards off her blade.

"Well, that explains why he was so easy to kill." Sakura said, making no effort to hide her annoyance. Kakashi rose out of the earth next to her and nodded.

"I had a bad feeling about it in the middle." He said, just sounding resigned. The Uzumaki and old woman appeared from the trees, frowning at the corpse.

"What could it be?!" Uzumaki asked.

"He..." The old woman murmured. Both Hatake and Sakura turned to look at her.

"Do you know this person?" He asked.

"Yes..." She said. "Yuura. He's a jōnin from my village."

"From the Sand, what does that mean?"

"I don't know."

"How recently was he in the village?" Sakura asked. "Could he have been an Akatsuki spy?"

"No way, he's been working faithfully as a leader for four years."

"Was he impersonating Itachi with a henge?" Uzumaki asked.

"No, this isn't that level of jutsu." Said Hatake. "The Goukakyuu is a jutsu that the Uchiha clan worked out and perfected. It recreates their bodies and allows them to control them from a distance, but with significantly less chakra and it requires a living sacrifice. The Uchiha used to capture enemy shinobi and send them on suicide missions during the last war."

"That's horrible!" The Uzumaki exclaimed.

"That's brilliant." Sakura said begrudgingly.

"Looks like the real one's at the hideout. His objective was to delay and gather information about us. Those bastards have good jutsu." Hatake grumbled.

"Indeed, this was clearly stalling." The old woman added. "They must have already started the extraction of the Bijuu, perhaps they wish to use the one tail Shukaku to make a new jinchūriki."

"Then there's no time then, we have to hurry to save Gaara." Hatake said, but his tone was grim.

"Jinchūriki?" Uzumaki asked.

"It's the name for people like you and Gaara," Sakura explained, the Uzumaki looking strangely angry about it. "The people who have a tailed beast sealed inside of them. How do you remove a Bijuu?" She directed the question towards the old woman.

"A sealing jutsu which releases the exact amount of power to match up to the Bijuu is used, but that takes a considerable amount of time." She answered. "But if that were done, the jinchūriki would die." She grimaced.

"Let's hurry." Uzumaki said. "I'll rescue Gaara." He started walking and they followed, quickly bouncing back up into the next line of trees.

They stopped for a break just after midnight, neither the Uzumaki nor the old woman capable of the sleepless stretches the ANBU frequently demanded. Sakura was glad for it, the previous few days travelling had been hard and heading into a fight with S-rank criminals tired was a good way to die.

She took the first watch, only a two hour slot in deference to the hurry they were in, woke up Hatake for the second- and last- watch and sped-ate a bowl of the stew they'd whipped up before falling straight into a nap. Well used to sleeping at a moments notice.

They awoke, packed up camp, and left whilst it was still dark, following the Akastuki trail.. The hideout came into sight early the next morning, Maito's team already standing before the giant rock door.

"That's a five barrier seal." Hatake said as they landed.

"You're late, Kakashi." Said Maito.

"Ah, well we ran into a bit of trouble on the way."

"Naruto-kun! Sakura-san!" Lee exclaimed as the Hyuuga grimaced at the Uzumaki.

"Yo!" Uzumaki yelled.

"Hey guys." Sakura greeted, pouring in just enough effort to not be construed as disinterested in them as she actually was. The weapons mistress scowled at her as Lee mooned but Sakura pretended not to notice. Instead, she beelined for Pakkun and dug out the pack of dog treats she'd taken to carrying around now she was working with Hatake again. The man gave her a side eye but did nothing to stop her so she took it as enthusiastic encouragement to her fattening his ninken. "For all your hard work, Pakkun." She crouched and held out the bone-shaped, Inuzuka made cookie.

"You really are a smart one, girly." The pug said and took the treat, his little tail wagging as he munched. Sakura smiled and pet the top of his tiny head with two fingers, only vaguely following the conversation occurring around her. When the pug was finished it burped and looked up with a serious expression. "I think I'll disappear, since I'll just be in the way if I stay. I wouldn't really be any help."

"Pakkun, good work!" Hatake nodded his agreement.

“Bye Pakkun!” Sakura said cheerfully and the pug disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“Right! First off this barrier, eh, Kakashi?” Said Maito. “How do we take it out?”

“This particular five barrier seal is created by tokens with ‘kin’ written on them and placed in five places in the vicinity.” Hatake explained. “To remove the barrier, all of them must be detached.”

“So where are they? The other four?” Asked Uzumaki.

“Neji-kun.”

“Understood.” The Hyuuga answered, activating his Byakugan in a spidery web of bulging veins. Sakura fought a grimace. She didn’t care that the Hyuuga’s were the ‘pretty clan’. No amount of perfect cheekbones and sculpted jawlines could overcome the how gross their eyes looked when they activated.

“Found them.” He said and rattled off the positions.

“Right, if it’s that range we’ll use these radios! While we’re taking Neji’s directions, we can keep in communication and we’ll find the locations of the tokens!”

He handed one to each member of the team and one to Hatake, the five of them efficiently setting them up before team Gai blurred out of existence. As they moved he climbed up the rock to crouch sideways next to the fifth token.

“Sakura get ready to smash it the moment I pull off the token.” Hatake said, discreetly making the ANBU sign for ‘tactic four’. Sakura’s lips quirked as she nodded. It seemed he didn’t trust the old woman and her very apparent sentimentality anymore than she did. “Naruto, Chiyo, stand to either side and prepare yourselves. We’ll break in with a button hook entry.”

They did not wait long before Maito’s tinny voice came over the radio and Hatake ripped off his token, launching off the rock and barking an order. “Sakura!”

“Ok!” She yelled, slamming her fist into the rock with a pulse of chakra. It exploded into dust and rock chunks, her chakra pushed specifically in just the right direction to make it explode outwards rather than inwards. Sakura used the chaos and lack of visibility to

switch with a water clone, the clone mimicking her signature in the same moment she made her own disappear, and the glassy feeling of the transparency jutsu settled over her skin.

As the three shinobi and her clone entered the small space she clung to the wall outside, using the Uzumaki being predictably loud and distracting to slip through the entrance and crawl her way up to the cavernous space's ceiling.

Sakura had nearly perfected her use of the jutsu, but there was still a slight warping that became more obvious when she passed over areas with distinct colour changes. Using the distraction and at this distance, it would have been essentially impossible for someone without the Sharingan to notice.

She crept slowly forwards as the conversation went on, keeping keen eyes on the back and forth.

Abruptly, the giant bird and blonde man flew through the entrance and the Uzumaki ran after them without a second thought. Hatake hesitated as he turned to clone-Sakura and the old woman, throwing a pair of capsules that the clone caught. "Naruto and I will handle the one outside. Sakura and Chiyo, take care of this one... but until team Gai gets back, *do not* do anything too drastic." His tone was entirely no nonsense and Sakura pulled her mouth into a scowl. Apparently Hatake had caught the loophole in her promise, it having voided after being attacked by Akatsuki, and yet he still wanted her to play nice with the old bat.

"Got it!" Cried clone-Sakura. Hatake nodded once and disappeared outside.

"Sakura, I'll handle him." The old woman said as she stepped forward. "Stay behind me." Clone-Sakura nodded and complied, on orders to follow the other's directions so Sakura could observe the fight and step in when a kill shot opened up. Her scowl deepened further, without the clear threat from Hatake she would have been *very* tempted to wait to attack until the crone had hopefully gotten herself killed. But now if she did then Kakashi would be mad at her.

Maybe the woman'd get injured or psychologically scarred a little. After all, Kakashi had just said not to do anything too drastic, not nothing.

The old woman sent a volley of kunai and the tail came up to deflect them. It swung, ripping the cloak to shreds and exposing a giant face.

The misshapen lump was a puppet.

“If you plan to oppose me then I’ve got no choice.” The puppet- or was it a man inside the puppet?- rasped. “Why don’t you and that kid join my collection, eh, Chiyo?” It released a wave of killing intent that soured the air like old milk. Sakura easily ignored it. “First, I’ll drag out your entrails. Then, when I’ve ripped off your skin, I’ll clean off all the blood.”

“Sakura that’s not Sasori’s real body.” Said the old woman “It’s a puppet.”

“I’ll treat it so it doesn’t decay. Then stock it up with the rest of my puppet collection. Like the old hag said, this is one of those bodies. Also, with the two of you it will become exactly three hundred bodies. That is my fine art.”

Sakura resisted the urge to roll her eyes, just focused on crawling down the wall behind the puppet soundlessly and keeping her eyes on the fight.

“I can tell that’s not his real body. But... where is his real body, then?” Clone-Sakura asked.

“His real body is on the inside.” The old woman said.

Sakura was now halfway down the wall and her eyes narrowed on the puppet consideringly. The clone could probably smash it. It didn’t have the ability to perform the highly controlled, massive amount of destruction that she’d done to the door but an uncontrolled, wild burst of pressurised chakra to smash something the size of a small car? Sure.

It just needed to get there without being injured.

The old woman leaned in to whisper to the clone and Sakura frowned as she strained her ears to hear. Whilst clones would follow orders sent through the connection between them and her in real time, they did not actually share senses. If Sakura closed her eyes and ears she would have no idea what the clone was hearing or seeing.

She thanked god- or in this case the cuckoos- for her enhanced hearing as she *just* made out the whispered words and gave the clone the go ahead.

“Alright, let’s go for it!” The clone said, stepping forward as the old woman attached her chakra strings to it. Thanks to the physical nature

of the water clone, the old woman wouldn't notice the clone was a clone despite the lack of squishy meaty stuff below its surface. The attacks were poisoned, so she'd have to make sure it didn't get hit at all- and hence it wouldn't be in danger of melting- and the clone would overcome its lack of ability to get close enough to smash the puppet.

It was perfect.

Sakura just had to sit back and wait for the real body to pop out.

The puppet roared and sent a mouthful of senbon that clone-Sakura and the old woman dodged, both of them rushing forwards. The puppet's arm detached and launched, the nobs and lumps on it exploding outwards once it drew level with the clone and the woman. They twisted and jumped, dodging and drawing ever closer to the puppet. Disappointingly, the old woman was competent enough to not even get a little hurt. There was a tense moment where Sakura was sure the clone would be popped by the tail and she prepared to launch herself at the puppet in that eventuality, but then it halted suddenly, centimetres from the clone's face.

Sakura smiled ruefully. The old bitch was pretty crafty, at least.

The clone punched. The puppet shattered. A black figure flew away from the remains and landed about a metre away from the wall.

"Of course, that's my grandmother." The figure said, making no move to remove the obstructing fabric.

Sakura waited. She would not blindly rush in and expose herself.

"No wonder, that the little girl would be able to avoid my traps." It said, an edge of mockery in its voice. "You saw through all of my attacks and you used chakra threads from the puppet jutsu to control the little girl. Furthermore, you even put chakra threads on the Hiruko's tail. Wasn't it when you attacked with kunai at the beginning? The chakra threads attached to the kunai switched over to the tail when they hit it."

"Indeed, even though I was suppressing the chakra as much as possible so it was invisible, you worked it out well." The old woman said.

"But of course, who was it who taught me to play with puppets?" The figure said, a hand reaching up and grabbing at the black fabric. "No

one else but you.”

“Yes, well, we’re done playing for the day.”

The figure ripped off the cloak as melodramatically as possible and the old woman gasped. The young boy in the Akatsuki cloak definitely shouldn’t have been that young but Sakura had seen Orochimaru. The man could overtake other people’s bodies and wear faces like masks. They lived in a world that could heal flesh and broken bones in minutes with magical ninja powers. Their Hokage was a woman in her fifties that didn’t look a day over twenty five. A little extended youth really wasn’t that shocking.

What Sakura *did* find interesting was the... seam? on his neck that she could only see from her position from above and looking down into the kid’s collar. It was a physical line between what looked like a normal head and neck and something a little more... wooden looking?

She frowned, largely ignoring the intensely gushy conversation going on before her to instead let her mind whirl. Was his body enhanced? Was it another fake? It was possible the puppeteer was simply hiding under the dirt somewhere, using a jutsu to watch the fight going on without physically seeing it. She had seen the Suna jinchūriki do something similar during the chūnin exams. She focused on her hearing for a moment. She couldn’t hear any breathing or heartbeat from the puppet, but she also couldn’t hear any unidentified noise from anywhere else in the room, and the sounds were potentially drowned out by the crone’s and clone-Sakura’s.

Sakura settled more firmly against the wall and lifted her hands in a seal. Her range was absolute crap and using the technique always gave her a migraine so it was pretty much useless in battle, but her clone had no chakra for any more attacks and she had no interest in playing along with the enemy and endlessly attacking puppets posing as his real bodies.

She closed her eyes and expanded her chakra sense as Cat had taught her, being very, very careful not to spike her signature. She could sense the old woman and clone-Sakura- it mimicking Sakura’s own signature and just feeling like a normal person- and she *could* sense the kid’s but it was strange. Like it was all concentrated in a spot on his left breast.

He definitely had chakra but he wasn’t using a normal chakra system. It was more like a tiny version of himself was sitting inside his chest

and steering the puppet that way.

Sakura's brows furrowed further. She didn't know how that was possible. Didn't know what kind of jutsu he was using.

...But did that matter?

Decision made she released the technique, ignored her rapidly building headache and crept down the wall. Thankfully, the puppeteer proved to be horribly arrogant and eager to gloat to his victims. The ego-driven idiot milking the old bitch's sentimentality for all it was worth in a classic villain monologue. Thus, Sakura had plenty of time to position herself behind him and silently draw her chokutō. She positioned it over the centre of chakra in the kid's body and waited, sending a mental order to her clone to be loud and distracting. She could make herself almost invisible, stop breathing and forcibly slow her chakra regulation until her very body cooled to room temperature for a short period of time but she couldn't stop that tiny little bit of killing intent leaking out when she made an attack.

So she held her position and thought about nothing but holding her position and she waited.

The clone screamed distractingly. The Kazekage puppet was launched at it. Sakura plunged her chokutō through the kid's chest. He froze. The puppet clattered to the ground. Sakura released her transparency jutsu and pushed her chakra through her system to heat her body back up with a sigh.

Her limbs filled with pins and needles and her brain pulsed with the beginnings of a migraine but she ignored it.

"Y-you!" Yelled the kid. His eyes were blown wide with horror as he looked back at her.

"Yeah, that was a clone the whole time." She gestured at clone-Sakura. Green eyes narrowed poisonously. "Tell me what you know about Orochimaru and I won't pump you so full of storm chakra you melt." She demanded with an edge of curt aggravation she didn't normally let seep into her voice.

Maybe she wasn't ignoring the headache all that well. So sue her. Compartmentalising your pain was hard when your compartmentalisation machine was the thing that was hurting.

The kid laughed. "I'm dying anyway." He pulled off the Akatsuki cloak

and exposed his puppet body. The left breast held a fucked up cylinder of flesh that Sakura had rammed her chokutō through. It was like mortadella that had been left out in the sun for a month. Rancid purple with green chunks and a gelatinous texture that sent it jiggling with every small shift of her blade. “I am a puppet, but an incomplete puppet with a ‘core’ of my real body. Not human not puppet.”

“Orochimaru. Talk.” Sakura growled, a sharp ache resolving behind her right eye.

“I’ll do something pointless for you then, a reward for defeating me.” He said, a small smile on his face. “No, you completely blindsided me. A truly formidable opponent.

“You want to know about Orochimaru? Go to the Tenchi bridge in the Grass village, at noon ten days from now. I have a spy in Orochimaru’s subordinates, I’m supposed to meet with him there.”

Sakura sighed. “I hope that’s true, unlike my own lie.” She pumped storm down her blade and the air filled with a noxious stench not dissimilar to burning liver. The flesh bubbled out of the puppet in viscous trails of oil-spill-coloured goo.

Her blade knocked the inside edge of the empty flesh hole and the back of the puppet opened. A circle of five senbon launched out of small tubes. She twisted in time to dodge two but three of them buried themselves into the meat of her right shoulder, piercing straight through the armour of her flak jacket.

She hissed and fell to her knees, chokutō clattering out of her hands as the puppet smashed to the ground. She could hear footsteps rushing across the cave and desperately held on to the connection with her clone. Kept the chakra pumping to it even as the poison sent her face-first to the floor and grinding her teeth to stop herself screaming. It burnt a trail of cold under her skin.

Unconsciousness sung like a siren from the corner of her mind but she forced herself to hang on. Forced herself to deal with the pain as the clone rushed to her side and jammed a needle into her neck.

Sweet, sweet warmth flooded her body. The pain dissipated and muscles loosened. Her entire body felt brittle, her head pounded in time to her heart beat, her skin pricked painfully and the senbon were still buried well into muscle but she was no longer dying. Pain was temporary. Death was- well.

Previous evidence pointed to temporary but her departure from this world would at least be permanent. Probably.

The clone melted into water and its cargo clattered to the floor.

“Asshole.” She breathed, only the threat of more surprise weaponry stopped her from smashing the puppet to pieces.

“You are... not dying?” The bitch asked, frowning down at her. Sakura pushed herself onto her knees and gestured at the two injectors. One empty, one not.

“Antidotes.”

The crone stared solemnly down at her grandson’s body for a moment before turning and taking a step towards Sakura. She tensed. “You do not trust me.” The crone said, frozen in her movements. Sakura raised incredulous eyebrows.

“Why would I?” Sakura hissed. The crone nodded.

“Of course, you are of the Leaf, I am from the Sand.” Her expression weary. “The friendly alliances are nothing more than fabrications, underneath it we just are enemies.” Sakura snarled at the old bitch.

“Oh fuck off.” She spat. Her voice pumped full of vitriolic disgust. The crone’s eyes widened. “When you’re working as a team the *least* important thing is which pretty little symbol sits on your forehead.” Sakura pushed herself up to standing and glowered. “I don’t trust you,” She stepped forward, (for once) looming over the hunched woman. “Because you broke that trust the very moment we walked in the door.” Her voice was poisonousness. Barely a whisper that was seemingly amplified through the cavern by the thick blanket of killing intent she was giving off. Like the oppressive feeling in the air moments before the outbreak of a monstrous electrical storm.

“I-”

“We came to help.” Sakura took a step forward. The crone took a step back, leaving a solid metre of space between them. “*You* disregarded our intentions, goals and the alliance and tried to kill Kakashi.” A much more aggressive step forward. A stumbling step back. The oppressive weight in the air doubled, just thinking about it and how she *couldn’t just end the bitch’s miserable life for trying to touch one of hers* sending the monster frothing at the mouth as it howled for blood. “And after you attacked the envoy bringing lifesaving medical care

and invaluable fighting assistance? You tried to play it off. As. A. Joke.” Sakura jabbed a finger into the crone’s chest. Her face was pale and sweaty and her limbs were shaky with the effort of holding up under Sakura’s killing intent. The jab pushed the crone back another stumbling step.

“Take responsibility for your actions.”

Another aggressive step. Another poke. The crone stumbled, teetered, and landed hard on her ass.

“Face up to your mistakes.”

Sakura bent down and twisted her hand in front of the crone’s dress. The old woman flinched backwards but Sakura was already yanking her upwards until their faces were only inches apart. Poisonous green eyes boring into shocked brown.

“And fucking apologise.”

She tossed the crone back to the ground with a sneer. Only Kakashi’s threat making the toss hard enough to bruise rather than break. Ignored the hunched form completely in favour of stalking towards the cave’s entrance. She used her anger as fuel to pull the senbon from her shoulder, the metal clattering in a bloody trail behind her, and wasted no time as she stepped into the sunlight and swiped a thumb through the blood gushing down her arm. A lightning fast series of hand signs and her palms hit the floor. A cuckoo popped into existence in a puff of smoke. It opened its beak, likely to loudly complain, but she cut it off.

“Five caterpillars. Lead me to Kashi and Naruto. No arguments.” Her tone was furious and the bird took to the sky without a word. After a minute of circling it dived back down and flew towards the forest. Sakura followed, the sound of footsteps behind her the only indication the crone had followed her.

Sakura didn’t care. Either the crone came or she didn’t.

Sakura rippled with blue. Her movements became faster and faster, following the flash of a bird through the leaves.

The footsteps behind her followed, began to flag and yet still followed.

Storm pulsed over Sakura’s skin. Her sleeves and much of her pants began to flake off, in her foul mood unable to concentrate on stopping

the storm from burning the areas it was most concentrated. Every step scorched foot prints of ash into the trees.

Sakura arrived to see Naruto covered in bubbling, acidic charka and Kakashi running towards him. She ignored them, instead streaking towards the tiny movement of blonde in the bushes. Eager for the chance to *hurt*. Her chokutō left a wake of ash and melted leaves as she sliced through the undergrowth, the blonde rolling just in time to avoid it and bursting away from her, a kunai in his mouth as his lone hand rummaged through the pouch at his hip, eyes wide and manic.

Sakura's chakra had already stringed. Already coated.

She kawarimi'd just as he'd felt the foreign chakra and panicked, spitting out the weapon. She appeared before him and her chokutō burned straight through his scratched hitai-ate. A truly outrageous amount of chakra pumped through it. His head boiled and melted as they plummeted to the ground. Sakura twisted the corpse below her and her feet landed on it's chest with a satisfying crack and squelch. Blue coated sandals crushing bone and organs like a boulder through papier-mâché.

She pulled her sword out, stopped her flow of chakra and straightened; sheathing the clean blade and ignoring the way blood and gore began to slosh over her feet. She turned her face to the sky and breathed deeply, forcing herself still through the head rush as her suddenly almost empty reserves hit her. Her anger abated, the monster slipping back into the box. Much of her pain eclipsed by the numbness of chakra exhaustion.

That had been monumentally stupid.

And monumentally satisfying.

She stepped away from the body to stumble and sway to a nearby tree. She pressed her back to the bark and sunk down until she hit the ground. Knees drawn up to her chest and head tilted back to rest on the trunk.

Kakashi, Naruto and the old lady appeared from one direction, Team Gai appeared from the other. Her summons landed on her knee and squawked loudly.

"Yeah, yeah I got it." She mumbled, digging a hand through her kit to unseal and pull out her jar of caterpillars with shaking hands. She tipped six into her palm and held it out as the bird chomped through

them eagerly. "Sorry for being a bitch, even if you probably deserved it." It swallowed the last caterpillar and puffed out of existence, looking distinctly round. The half full jar slipped out of numb fingers and spilled over the floor. She couldn't find the energy to care.

The old woman appeared by her side and pressed a glowing green hand to her shoulder. "Idiot girl, pushing yourself that far, injured and having just fought off poisoning?" The old woman clucked her tongue and a second green hand landed over Sakura's forehead. "You're a mess, I'm shocked you're even conscious with this little chakra left."

Her migraine blessedly abated and Sakura smiled. "What do you mean, I've got a whole three percent left!" She chuckled weakly and blinked away black spots, the sweet embrace of unconsciousness looking more and more tempting.

"Sakura-chan." An orange blur said from her left. Her eyes drooped and she yawned.

"Didn't do 'nything too bad." Sakura slurred as her eyes slid shut.

"I'll take her." Someone said and she was lifted onto a familiar back. She buried her face into a flak jacket and let unconsciousness claim her.

-

When Sakura opened her eyes again she was still being carried on Hatake's back, but she felt freshly washed and they were walking through the desert. She blinked, rubbed an eye and straightened to look at the people around them.

Maito was walking next to them with three packs on his back, enthusiastically gesturing with his hands as he told a story about... fighting himself? The Uzumaki was in an argument? Undergoing a friendly competition? Flirting? with Lee and the Hyuuga, the weapons mistress watching them with an extremely confused expression. Sakura glanced down at herself and realised she was clad nothing more than her shinobi blacks.

She looked up from her bare feet to see a grey eye peering back at her.

"Where are my shoes?" She asked and Hatake eye smiled at her for a moment before turning back to watch where they were going. Maito was laughing next to them.

“They were pretty gross so we threw them out, Sakura-chan. Along with most of what you’d been wearing actually.” He said. She sighed and leaned back into his back, stretching her arms over his shoulders. “Your flak jacket survived, though it needs a new right shoulder.”

“A small price to pay for such an impressive victory!” Maito boomed. “Truly, taking down two Akatsuki is a very youthful feat!” That caught the attention of the others and Uzumaki bounded over, the rest trailing behind him.

“Sakura-chan!” Uzumaki cried. “You’re awake! The Suna medics said you were just super tired but Shizune had already gone and we wanted to get you checked out by granny so we left early!” He babbled and she smiled.

“I appreciate the concern, though I do just feel tired.” She said. He smiled and threw his hands behind his head, walking along beside them.

“That’s great, Sakura-chan!”

“What happened?” She asked. Uzumaki’s face turned solemn and he didn’t answer.

“Chiyo-sama used Naruto’s chakra and a jutsu that gave her life to bring back Gaara-sama.” The Hyuuga explained when it became apparent no one else would. His voice was bland and professional but tinged with a surprising amount of respect for a member of the stuffy clan. “The Suna shinobi caught up to us just as the Kazekage woke and we returned to the village for a memorial service.”

“Aah.”

“The old lady told me something to tell you.” Uzumaki said, his face scrunching up in confusion. “She said... ‘You were right. Stay the hell out of Suna.’ Then she apologised to sensei for attacking him.”

Sakura laughed. “God what a cow. So, how did you guys beat the Akatsuki guy? He was cowering in the bushes when I showed up.”

That launched the Uzumaki into a dramatic retelling of the events and after a few sentences Maito decided to enthusiastically join in with what his team were doing at the time. Then Lee began physically jumping in to make the occasional sound effect or comment, which led to the girl throwing in some mostly weapon related anecdotes- and some weapons- and the Hyuuga adding basic contextual information

the others glossed over in favour of showy descriptions of explosions.

Hatake quietly wilted beneath her.

“We told Suna that Team Gai took down the Akatsuki called Deidara and you passed out after helping Chiyo-sama take down Sasori of the Red Sand.” The Hyuuga said as the group finished their tale. “Hatake-san seemed sure you would not appreciate the recognition and ordered us not to mention the colour of your sword.” Sakura couldn’t really be sure, but she was almost certain the featureless purple eyes were fixed on her with curiosity. “I am unsure why this would be the case. I watched you take down Deidara with my Byakugan, it was most impressive.”

“Sensei was right- thank you Kakashi- really wouldn’t want to have to start looking over my shoulder at peace talks, you know?” She said. The Hyuuga’s face seemed torn between confusion and grief. Maybe it was too early to be making jokes about the Hyuuga incident.

Then again, Hatake’s chest was shaking with silent laughter beneath her.

(Kakashi collapsed ten minutes out from Konoha, apparently having been cycling chakra to stay moving. She walked the rest of the way on foot.)

Chapter End Notes

it's a bigoo boyo.

three ANBU and an idiot walk into a bar...

Chapter Summary

Kakashi's stuck in the hospital and Sakura isn't going to let the opportunity to bother him go to waste.

After all, if he can't move he can't run.

"Can we trust it?" The Hokage asked. "What if it's a trap? With Orochimaru as bait, Akatsuki could be lying in wait for you at the Tenchi Bridge."

"I think it's unlikely to be a trap by Akatsuki." Sakura said, face blank. "But if it is, then we'll just have to fight." Her tone was matter of fact.

"You say you'll fight but Kakashi will be out of commission for at least a week and there's only six days. I guess I'll have to form a new team."

"Tsunade-sama!" The Hokage's assistant protested. "In that case you should send a completely different team to investigate. Even if we send Sakura like you said, you must leave Naruto-kun!"

Sakura watched the Hokage think, knowing she wouldn't make that an option but curious to see what the Senju would say.

"Shizune, Sakura is like you, one of the few shinobi I can trust in." She said and Sakura couldn't help the small amount of surprise that leaked into her expression. Sure, they'd spent quite a bit of time training together- the Hokage had no qualms about using her rank to pull Sakura out of work when the Senju needed to blow off some steam- but she wouldn't have guessed the Hokage would particularly trust her. She was well aware of Sakura's personality. Perhaps it was *because* she understood Sakura's motives, highly immoral as they were? "I am definitely sending Sakura's team, team Kakashi, on this mission."

"Then wouldn't it be the same if my team went?" The assistant protested.

"It's not the same, Naruto is desperately chasing after his old teammate, Sasuke. He believes strongly, more than anyone, in rescuing Sasuke and Sakura has showed strong belief in Naruto. Those strong feelings will cause the mission to succeed. You and Sakura are

different.”

“Just for the sake of full disclosure.” Sakura said, fully aware of both Uzumaki was standing above them and that she’d very likely be saying this even if he wasn’t. When Uzumaki grew fully into his powers he’d be a force to be reckoned with and almost certainly end up as the Hokage. She wasn’t going to risk being one of the future Hokage’s best friends just to keep her tentative camaraderie with the current one. “I wouldn’t risk my friendship with Naruto by keeping this information from him, anyway. If you decided not to send him he would just go anyway and I would go with him. So either send us on a team or we’ll go get Sasuke back on our own.”

“Damn right!” The Uzumaki said from above them. The Hokage’s assistant jumped and looked around at him. Sakura fake jumped and looked around at him. The Hokage just smiled.

“Well now that you’ve heard it, what do you have to say, Naruto?” She asked.

He grinned. “I’ll go looking for members straight away!” And then he jumped, disappearing towards the streets.

“Bah, always rushing. I haven’t even finished talking.” The Senju said with fondness. “I will assign members to fill the gaps left by Kakashi and Sasuke. Tell that to Naruto too.” She said, walking off.

“Tsunade!” A voice called from behind them and Sakura turned to see an old woman looking out the door. “I would like to speak with you. Come.”

Sakura’s eyes narrowed. The distinctive robes the woman was wearing marked her as a council member and, considering the amount of corruption Sakura had sniffed out on her trips through archives, she was leery of anyone with power that treated the Hokage with such blatant disrespect. She turned her eyes from the scene and did her best to remain inconspicuous as she leapt over the railing. She had no interest in gaining the attention of anyone like that.

She briefly considered following the Hokage’s orders and talking to Naruto but figured he was probably having fun. Instead she headed in the direction of the hospital.

She had a Hatake to bother.

Sakura cheerfully entered the hospital room and placed an orange toad plushy on the end of the bed. She'd gotten that one made custom. It had yellow tufts of fur on its back and was the size of an average five year old. "Hiya, Kashi-sensei!"

Hatake was lying flat with the blanket pulled up to his eyes. Little more than a shock of silver hair on a pillow. His open eye blinked and looked down at the toad.

"Do you want me to get you a mask?" She asked and he shook his head.

"This is fine." He said. She shrugged and dragged a chair across the room to sit next to the bed.

"Team Kakashi is being sent to explore the intel I got off Sasori before he died. We're meeting a supposed spy in six days in Grass country, though since you're stuck in here and Sasuke's spot is open the Hokage is assigning two others to fill the spots." She said cheerfully as she kicked off her shoes and used the bed as a leg rest, ignoring the small 'oof' Hatake made. "So they'll probably be ANBU disguised as real humans."

"You're human." He said. She tilted her head and hummed noncommittally. After a moment of silence he asked, "Naruto?"

"Knows about it, but missed the part where Tsunade said she'd assign the teammates." She said. "Hence, he is currently searching the village for the appropriate comrades." His eye turned admonishing and she pouted. "I figure he's having fun, plus he needs to go say hi to the other's at some point, the motivation of a mission is probably the only time he would." She explained. He conceded the point with a blink. "I'll go and tell him after a half hour or so."

"You're worried." He said. Her eyebrows furrowed.

"Am I?" She asked, Hatake just stared. "I don't think it's an Akatsuki trap."

"But?"

"Sasori was overconfident. He spent a significant portion of the fight with Chiyo bragging."

"You think it's Orochimaru's trap."

"I think there's a good possibility."

"It'll be fine." He eye smiled reassuringly and she nodded.

"If you say so, Kakashi." She murmured. "Anyway, enough about me, what about you!" He blinked. "You carried me through a desert! With chakra exhaustion!"

"I didn't want to be carried." He said and she raised an eyebrow.

"You didn't have to carry me."

"The other's would have thought it strange if I didn't."

"They just would have blamed it on your lazy personality."

"Would you have wanted to be carried by one of them?" He asked. She paused.

Three teenage boys, a girl she'd never said more than three words to and Maito Gai. Her eyes widened. Her legs came off the bed. She bowed in her seat.

"Thank you for your service." Her voice was deadly serious, Hatake snorted softly.

"Maa, Sakur—"

A bird tapping on the window interrupted him, a summons on its leg. Sakura smoothly walked around the bed and pushed it open, pulling off the small scroll and reading it as the bird flew away. "The Hokage wants to speak with me." She stuffed the scroll in a pocket and pulled her shoes on, hopping on one foot back to the window. She paused as she was crouched on the sill, turning to smile over her shoulder at the silver shock of hair. "Bye, Kakashi! I'll come see you before we leave."

She jumped, speeding to Hokage tower.

-

She walked in to the office to find Tiger standing before the Senju.

"Tsunade-sama, ANBU-san." She nodded to each, staying aware of both the formality of the office and the lack of mask on her face.

"Sakura." The Hokage nodded to her. "Tiger will be taking Kakashi's place."

That... would probably not end well. For Tiger. But Sakura would feel better knowing one of her teammates so well.

“To take Kakashi-senpai’s place, it is indeed an honour.”

“This is not at ANBU mission. It is a regular mission.” The Hokage said. “You will remove your mask and be assigned a code-name. For the duration of your mission you will be assigned the name ‘Yamato’. Neither you or Sakura have ever met before.”

“Understood.” They said simultaneously, Tiger removed the mask.

“There is one more person. One of the members of the ANBU training department ROOT has been assigned to team Kakashi.” The Senju said and Sakura’s eyes widened.

The *disbanded* ROOT? The ROOT that was whispered about in the fashion of bedtime horror stories in ANBU locker rooms?

“What do you mean?” Tiger asked, face alarmingly blank.

“Keep an eye on his movements.” The Hokage said, her face was serious. “The new member is one that Danzō recommended. Danzō is a man that previously opposed the sandaime, emphasising the use of military power over diplomacy. He created a seperate division in ANBU, the training division ROOT, with himself as leader. The group has been disbanded and he has lost his position but he hasn’t changed. He must have some ulterior motive.”

“Are you sure you’re not overthinking this?”

“Mmh, anyway. Neither of you know each other, but come up with a plan to keep a look out on the fourth member.”

“Ok!” Tiger said.

“Yes, Hokage-sama” Sakura said.

She made a mental note to stay the fuck away from peaking Danzō’s interest as she followed Tiger out of the office.

-

The next day team seven met at the usual time and at the usual training ground, yet their leader was already there. So in fact was the ROOT kid and the Uzumaki.

Sakura was last. It was an... unusual feeling. She almost felt powerful. *She* was the one *they* were waiting on. Was this why Hatake was always late?

The Uzumaki apparently hadn't been waiting long as he was pointing at the ROOT kid in shock.

"Y-you!" He screamed.

"Do you know him?" She asked, completely ignoring Tiger.

"Sorry about before. I just wanted to gauge the ability of my new team member." The kid said, a horribly fake smile on his face. Sakura was confused.

When she'd heard the new teammate would be from ROOT, she'd assumed he'd be some kind of bloodthirsty monster, but the kid wasn't pinging off a single one of her instincts. He seemed dangerous, sure, and that he was in ANBU meant he likely had a lot of blood on his hands. But he didn't like it in the slightest. He didn't want to kill. Didn't even feel like he'd enjoy the violence.

A complete softy.

"I just didn't know how much I'd have to look after the little prick with no balls."

With no social skills.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?!" The Uzumaki was being held back by Tiger as he screamed, the man softly trying to calm him down.

Sakura was staring at the new kid, who was still smiling a poorly faked smile.

It wasn't the same way the Uchiha had no social skills. The pair had a similar surface level appearance and the same gooey core of goodness, but completely different middles. The Uchiha was like a cat, proud and haughty and disguised social awkwardness with simply thinking himself above everything.

The new kid was actually trying. He was just really, really bad at it.

"Totally a hedgehog." Sakura said with a nod. Everyone turned to look at her. She tilted her head and pointed at the new kid. "Don't you think? Spiky on the outside but with a squishy, cute core of goodness

on the inside. A hedgehog.”

“SAKURA! HOW COULD YOU CALL THIS GUY CUTE?!” The Uzumaki said.

“To be clear I mean cute as is puppy dogs, not attractive.” Sakura said. She really didn’t want to create any misconceptions on anyone’s parts.

“You think I’m a good person?” New kid asked. Sakura smiled and nodded.

“Yep!” She said cheerfully. “I have *really* good instincts but you don’t set them off at all. Even Naruto sets off some of them and he’s a giant ball of sunshine.” She pointed at the blonde who had settled to the point Tiger had stopped choke-holding him. Tiger himself was watching her with his eyebrows almost imperceptibly raised. The man had plenty of experience with just how accurate her instincts were. “The only other person I’ve met that doesn’t set off any is Choji and he’s literally the nicest person on the face of the earth.”

“That’s true.” The Uzumaki nodded. “Choji doesn’t have a mean bone in his body.” The new kid’s brows had furrowed. Just a tiny, little bit.

They all fell silent.

“Anyway.” Tiger said. “From now on I will be taking Kakashi’s place and the four of us will be going on a mission. There’s no time to toss you all in a cage and get you used to each other. So introduce yourselves.”

“Uzumaki Naruto.” He was scowling again.

“Haruno Sakura.” With a cheerful, very real looking fake smile.

“My name is Sai.” The laughable fake smile was back.

“And I’m Yamato.” Tiger said. “Now we all know each other, so that’s the end of that. I’ll explain our mission.

“From here, the four of us will proceed to Tenchi Bridge. There we will intercept the spy Akatsuki has in Orochimaru’s organisation and bring them back. This is a chance for us to find out about Orochimaru and Uchiha Sasuke. We can gain an invaluable source of information which may lead to formulating a plan to assassinate Orochimaru and take Sasuke back.

“So keep focused!

“We will assemble at the gate in one hour! After sorting out equipment, we will depart!”

They nodded and headed off. Tiger and new kid in one direction, Uzumaki and Sakura in the other. A small, practically invisible bird followed the new kid home and perched on the tree outside his window, keen eyes and ears trained on the inside.

“Ah, I just can’t stand that asshole.” The Uzumaki said. “I mean, he mustn’t be that bad if you think he’s a good person but why is he taking Sasuke’s place?”

“You trust my judgement of him?” Sakura asked, surprised.

“Of course, you’ve always had great judgement of people.” The Uzumaki said, as if this was a given fact. Sakura was thrown. Had she ever shared her suspicions of people with the original team seven? She remembered being far more closed off with them. “Like that Kabuto guy at the chūnin exams. He totally freaked you out, I’d thought you just didn’t like his glasses or something but he turned out to be working for Orochimaru.”

“That’s surprisingly perceptive.” Sakura said. “But why don’t you like Sai, aside from his obvious social deficiencies?”

“Three people is enough for team Kakashi!” Naruto said, turning suddenly heated. “That asshole can’t replace Sasuke!”

Ah, Sakura understood. She probably should have expected this, actually.

“Mmh, I understand how you feel, but I can’t say I agree.”

“WHAT?! SASUKE’S TOTALLY COOLER THAN THAT ASSHOLE!”

“No, no that’s not what I meant at all.” Sakura explained quickly and the Uzumaki calmed. “I mean I don’t see it as him replacing Sasuke, or even really taking Sasuke’s spot. He’s just another team member. I see team Kakashi as a six-man team at the moment. Though Sai and Yamato are only temporary until they prove themselves.”

The Uzumaki was frowning as she talked, thinking over her words.

“I guess that’s alright.” He said slowly, testing the words. “But if he

say's he's a replacement for Sasuke I'll punch him."

"Of course!" She said with a cheerful grin. This mission was going to be a *lot* of fun. "No *temporary* member can be allowed to talk shit about the originals! Us four are totally cooler than them!"

Tiger would *hate* it.

"YEAH! BELIEVE IT!"

-

Sakura had to stick to the wall with one foot as she tapped on the glass warningly and pried the window open with her toes. She entered the hospital room sideways, twisting awkwardly halfway through so she could fit.

She turned to see Hatake- bedsheets up to his nose- looking at her with his eyebrows in his hairline.

"Hi, Kashi-sensei!" She said with a cheery grin, placing the collection of plushies with the toad at the end of his bed and dragging over and slumping into her usual seat.

There was a silver wolf slightly larger than the toad with black fur over its muzzle and around one red eye. A black cat with red eyes that was smaller than both of them, but not by much. And a tiny, pale pink bird with green and white stripes on its belly.

"I can't stay long, I'm meant to be at the gates to go in half an hour." She said with a smile. His eye was still looking at the plushies, brows furrowed. "I was going to bring them one at a time, but then I realised you'd be out of the hospital by the time I got back so you're getting them all at once."

"Sakura." He said, voice flat.

"Yes, Kakashi?" She asked cheerfully.

"Why?" His voice was stressed. "How?" Her smile widened.

"I think they're more interesting than flowers." She said. "And there's this one plushy store that'll do anything if you have the money."

He turned to look at her, his visible strip of face despairing. Her smile widened even further. She leaned in and covered her mouth with a hand as though sharing a great secret.

"I have the money." She (loudly) whispered. He stared at the ceiling, closed his eye for a moment and opened it again. "Don't you want to hear about the new teammates?"

Hatake sighed. Did not look away from the ceiling. "I suppose." His voice was moody. She chuckled.

"Well, your replacement is Tenzō which I think is hilarious, but his name is Yamato now and I have to pretend not to know him." She said but he didn't react, still looking firmly up at the ceiling. "The other one is apparently ROOT."

Hatake's eyes snapped open and his head whipped around to face her. The Sharingan spun wildly. Sakura could feel the shock on her face.

Slowly, the man lifted a finger from under the blanket and pressed it to his covered lips. She nodded. He held the blanket to the bottom of his face and sat up.

'Talk, silent.' He said with ANBU hand signs and the Sharingan focused on her mouth.

'It was when Tsunade called me up to her office.' She said silently, keeping her lip movements natural. 'She said he was from ROOT, Danzō had put him on the team and told Tiger and I to keep an eye on him. She did say the group was disbanded, but it was just lip service. She heavily suggested that Danzō was undermining her rule as Hokage and had kept running ROOT as a secret organisation.'

Hatake slumped, his face drawn and weary, and the hand not holding up the blanket rubbed his right eye for a moment before opening it again and focusing back on her. 'Continue.' He signed.

'The new guy is interesting. No social skills what so ever so probably more assassin than infiltrator. Apparently a formidable long range fighter with a Kekkei Genkai that creates living creatures out of ink drawings.' Sakura's brow furrowed. 'But my instincts say he's a good person. Choji levels of good.' Hatake's eyebrows rose. 'I honestly think there's a good chance Naruto will be Naruto and convert him.' She stopped talking and he closed the Sharingan again.

He signed 'danger, be wary' and lowered himself back down to the bed. Sheet comfortably up to his eyes, a hand shooing her towards the window as he went.

"We'll be back soon, Kakashi-sensei." She said cheerily as she opened

the glass. She paused, one foot on the sill. "Oh! I nearly forgot!" She dug around in her pack, pulled out two paper bags filled with fresh-baked cookies and dumped the emptier one- the salted almond and honey types, in deference to him not liking anything overly sweet- on Hatake's chest. "See yah!" She leapt out the window, beelining for the rooftops. As she went, a bird landed on her shoulder and sung into her ear.

She fed it a handful of caterpillars and it disappeared.

Sakura landed at the gates to find the others waiting for her, the Uzumaki looking annoyed and the new kid with a horribly fake smile on his face. Tiger looked seconds from snapping.

"Ah, Sakura-chan, right on time." Tiger said and she smiled.

"Cookie, anyone?" She asked and predictably the Uzumaki dove for them, grabbing two for each hand. Tiger put a show on of being unsure before taking one, thanking her gently. The new kid watched the other's take them, then saw the force of her puppy dog eyes trained on him and took one. A tiny bit of the tension in the corners of his eyes relaxed, just a few millimetres of lowering, and the very corner's of his lips quirked upwards a few degrees as he chewed.

"Right then!" Tiger said between mouthfuls and headed out the gates. "Team Kakashi departs!"

The four began walking in comfortable camaraderie and Sakura's smile turned smug.

The Haruno family cookies strike again!

watching a blind man drive with no steering wheel

Chapter Summary

Sakura watches two teenage boys get into a series of catfights, loses her sight and finds common ground with their enemy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It took two hours for Uzumaki and the new kid to start an argument. Sakura thought this was quite an impressive stretch of time, but the vein on Tiger's forehead disagreed.

"Please stop staring at me, don't make me hit you." New kid said, somehow without putting a single hint of animosity in his tone or his body language. Instead, it was said with the polite indifference of a retail worker nine hours into a twelve hour Boxing Day shift, working entirely on muscle memory alone as the hundredth soccer mom of the day insisted that he 'just check in the back'. It was actually impressive how bland the kid could make his smile.

"Every damn thing you say just pisses me off!" Uzumaki yelled, brandishing a fist threateningly.

"I don't have any malice towards you,"

"LIAR!"

"I'm just trying to put on that kind of attitude."

"AHA!! You do have malice!!" Uzumaki was growing red-faced with anger. "Why the hell are you here?! All you do is piss people off!"

"Hey, hey!" Said Tiger. "Don't say something like that right in front of your taicho!" He seemed to be under the mistaken impression that the Uzumaki held even a token amount of respect for authority.

And really, the kid was mistreated by adults his whole life, nearly got murdered by one of his academy teachers and then was taught by Hatake and the perverted Sannin. Sakura could see where he was coming from.

“Teamwork and cooperation are the most important things in a team. I thought Kakashi-san had already taught you that.” Tiger continued. “Someone like you in a team with the great Kakashi-san, what is it with you?”

Sometimes Sakura wondered if Tiger ever actually went through puberty or if he simply fell off a tree one day, fully grown and worshipping Hatake as a minor deity. You would think someone with even vague memories of being a teenage boy wouldn't have to ask why a teenage boy was picking fights.

“He's not a real member of team Kakashi! He's temporary!” Uzumaki cried, pointing a finger into the new kid's face. “He's nowhere near as cool as Sasuke! I'll never consider him a real member!”

“Well I'm glad you think of me that way.” New kid said. “I wouldn't want to be likened to the weak, shit for brains Orochimaru's clone who only cared about power and ran off to Orochimaru, betraying Konoha.”

“You bastard.” Uzumaki growled, fist clenched as he stepped forward.

Sakura smiled cheerfully as the Uzumaki threw a punch at the new kid. Having seen it coming from a mile away, the new kid dodged but Uzumaki was forming the seal for shadow clones and about to-

A massive cage of wood sprung up from nowhere behind the three of them and both boys stopped mid-movement.

“I said there's not much time until Tenchi bridge, but there's five days. If you guys won't stop arguing, I'll have to toss you in a cage. As the mediator, here's my proposition.” Tiger said, leaning against the cage walls. “You can spend all day or so in a cage to work out your differences or we can go to a hotel that has hot springs, what'll it be?”

“You guys don't know me very well either.” Tiger's face became intense, using the glare he'd perfected to put drunk ANBU in line. Unsurprisingly, it worked great on the Uzumaki. “I like being nice and friendly, but I don't have any problems ruling with fear, either.” The Uzumaki was nodding fiercely, Sakura and New Kid nodded along with him.

Tiger got rid of the cage and the group went back to walking in silence.

After a minute or two, Sakura moved into step with New Kid.

“You know,” She said and he fake smiled at her. “Four out of six things you said were factually incorrect, and one of the other two is very subjective.”

“Ah and which were those?” New Kid asked.

“You said Sasuke is a ‘weak willed shit-for-brains Orochimaru’s clone who only cared about power and ran off to Orochimaru, betraying Konoha’.” Sakura said. Uzumaki became progressively angrier as she talked but she waved a placating hand and he stayed silent.. “Your first supposition was that Sasuke is weak. Sasuke is not only talented, but he’s also an exceptionally hard worker, he was the strongest genin in the leaf when he left and I can guarantee that he’s been training his ass off ever since and will in all likely hood probably be at least jōnin level. Ergo, he really can’t be earnestly called weak.”

New Kid made no expression to acknowledge her statement until he gave a single, tiny nod. She simply waited, smiling pleasantly and walking along side him until he did.

“Your second supposition was that Sasuke has ‘shit for brains’. Aside from the fact that that’s physically impossible, Sasuke is also extremely intelligent. While his social skills are lacking, he was often the quickest to work out strategies and would use complex, multi-step plans to back those he fought into a corner.” She said, paying particular attention to the way New Kid’s eyes tightened just a few millimetres. “But to be fair, that is anecdotal evidence, I mean Naruto and I only spent almost every day with the guy for a year as well as most of our childhood. It’s not like we would know wether or not he’s smart.”

She chuckled. New Kid opened his mouth to say something in response but Sakura barrelled over him. She wanted to make clear this conversation was anything but friendly.

“Third supposition, that Sasuke is an ‘Orochimaru’s clone’. Aside from the fact that they don’t even look similar, they both have very different goals and ideals. Orochimaru’s greatest drive in life is to achieve immortality and master every jutsu in existence. He is driven by a passion for science that outweighs any morals he has, leading him to perform human experimentation and countless horrific atrocities because his goals are ultimately selfish ones. Orochimaru only wants to achieve things for himself so he uses others to do so. Sasuke, however, is driven by the deep seeded desire to avenge his family. His life long ambition is to rebuild the Uchiha clan and avenge

those that have died. He is driven by selfless goals, to achieve things for the other's he held important to him, so he does not use others to do so. He is completely, fundamentally unlike Orochimaru.

"Fourth supposition. Sasuke 'only cared for power'. This is false. Sasuke has one ambition in life and he simply sees power as a way to achieve this. His quest for power is ultimately for the sake of his goal, not for the sake of the power itself. He's also particularly fond of tomatoes.

"Your fifth statement was actually correct. Sasuke did leave Konoha to go to Orochimaru." Sakura said cheerfully. Uzumaki was grinning and Tiger looked just a little shell shocked. New Kid was fake smiling but the tightness around his eyes had increased another few millimetres and his brows were just ever so slightly furrowed. After a few minutes of silence New Kid finally cracked.

"And the sixth?" He asked.

"Ah! Well, you said that Sasuke has betrayed Konoha but I would personally argue that he has done no such thing." She replied.

"He left the village."

"He did do that, but there's no evidence that he has shared sensitive information about the village or that he has actually taken any physical actions against the village. In fact, the evidence we have just points to Sasuke having gone to one place and trained for two and a half years. He didn't have a mission nor any responsibilities when he left. He just simply quit being a Konoha shinobi and left the village. I fail to see how that is betrayal. Or even wrong, really."

"It's desertion." New Kid replied.

"It is, but only if you hold him as bound to the contract we sign upon joining the academy. That contract states that upon graduation we become a member of the military and are legally bound to serve a full five years service. However we sign this contract as children. Sasuke signed it when he was five. Children are unable to grasp the full scope of their decisions, they think in the short term, cannot comprehend the way their choices affect themselves and others, nor can they grasp the physical and mental effect the shinobi career can have on a person. If someone cannot fully comprehend their own decisions, how can their decisions possibly be taken as binding without that inherently being a form of manipulation and indoctrination and hence morally reprehensible?"

New Kid looked away from her, black eyes fixed on the horizon. “That is a lot to think about.”

“Of course!” Sakura replied with a sympathetic smile. “You wouldn’t want to thoughtlessly run your mouth about things you know nothing about, that could really upset the people around you!” Her voice was full of humour as she clapped the New Kid’s back just a little too hard to be friendly.

Sakura took a few quick strides to catch up to Uzumaki, ignoring Tiger’s admonishing glance, dark eyes following her warily all the way.

“Hey Naruto how’s getting the Rasengan one handed going?”

“Ah I actually did it.”

“No way, good job!”

“Yeah but it took like twenty minutes to form it.”

-

The hot springs were certainly a pleasant break. Probably.

Sakura wouldn’t know.

Instead, she was hinged into a man, surrounded by an expensive notice-me-not seal and imitating New Kids’ chakra to methodically work her way through his bag. She searched quickly, having entered soon after the boys, with a particular target in mind. At the bottom of his bag, behind a seal trap that would have burned her hand off if she hadn’t been mimicking the teen’s chakra, was the envelope.

Sakura opened it.

It was ANBU personnel files.

It looked like *every* ANBU personnel file.

She had three choices. First, leave it unchanged, making certain New Kid wouldn’t realise its discovery and everything would go as planned. Second, change it just a little, knowing the bird only saw the kid look through the first few pages. Third, burn everything inside.

For any of the options, slipping one of the seeds she’d been given into it was a must.

She grimaced. Sakura was a self-centred person. She knew this.

She flicked through the pages until she came across her own profile. With chocolate coloured skin, brown eyes, caramel hair and a completely different facial structure, the picture looked nothing like Sakura. No one flicking through them would connect the image to her.

(Henges and physical disguises were banned when taking the photo. Since Sakura's abilities were neither, she'd been able to successfully argue the use of them when she took it. She was pretty sure the commander had just found it funny, anyway.)

The name though. Just a glance away from it were the damning words 'Haruno Sakura'. She pulled the profile and stuffed it into her cheek. Let her saliva dissolve the paper until she could swallow it to be permanently destroyed without risking fire, chakra spikes or potentially leaving sensitive information lying around. After a half-moments consideration she pulled the files of team Ro that were in the back half of the envelope as well. It was only Monkey's and Cat's, but it was better than nothing. Those joined her own. A seed was pressed into one of the packet's corners, slotted underneath the paper section of the most thickness in the best attempt to hide it.

She had almost, almost considered finishing when she found the scroll. It looked like a basic food kit sealing scroll on the outside, but when she peeked inside it she stopped. Unrolled it. Put her hands over the markings.

A burst of New Kid's chakra and a small black book poofed into view. She flipped through the pages, noting the crossed out faces and confirmed her suspicions about the kid- there was no way he was here to infiltrate them, Shimura had to be smarter than sending a kid with no social skills on an infiltration mission to survive so many years- when she stopped. A smile stretched her face.

Looked like New Kid was trying to assassinate the Uchiha. No wonder he got so stressed when she talked about Uchiha's likely abilities. She replaced the book, resealing it, and rolled up the scroll.

She would be interested in seeing the Uchiha destroy the idiot. She hummed. Maybe she'd get lucky and could nudge them in the right direction.

Sakura replaced everything in his bag, making careful effort to leave it exactly how it had been when she'd found it. She had already slipped a seed into his food, now she was done for the night.

She finally headed out and to a quiet corner, and dropped her henge. The water was warm and she remained relaxed even through the Uzumaki being predictably loud and distracting.

-

Sakura awoke well rested and with almost no soreness in her body.

Considering how slowly they'd travelled the day before followed by the long bath and actual futon rather than a blanket on the ground, it wasn't all that surprising. Still, though, it was a little strange.

She rolled into a sitting position and narrowed her eyes at New Kid's silhouette at the edge of the pier.

She sighed, stretched and got changed into her jōnin gear, leaving her hair down in deference to her relaxed state. Operation convert the New Kid in the Uzumaki's place was a go.

"Hey New Kid!" She called cheerfully. "You're an artist, huh?" She leant over his shoulder.

"Do you need something?" He asked. She tilted her head.

"I'm expressing an interest in your interests," She explained. "In that manner trying to form a basis of emotional connection between us as teammates, the first step to building a real bond with someone."

"I see." The kid clearly didn't.

"I'm surprised it's abstract." She said. "You seem more like a surrealist, but I suppose this is your squishy hedgehog insides showing." He blinked. "Does it have a title?"

"...who knows." He answered. She considered the picture.

"It reminds me of a dream I had, once." She started. "About these flowers called poppies. There was a great battle that left the lands in ruin and the earth nothing but fields of mud. Once the battle was finished the very first plants to grow were bright red poppies as if they'd been fed by the sheer amount of blood soaking the soil." She turned back to the New Kid with a smile. "I think it's beautiful."

He looked down at the picture. "I don't feel anything at all."

Sakura felt defeated. Her skills laid more at getting to the sane ones. Weirdos, sure, but sane.

She had no idea how Uzumaki did it.

It was looking more and more like she'd get to see that fight.

"Well that sure explains why everything you say is insensible!" Uzumaki cried from behind them. "We're about ready to head out! Yamato-taicho told me to come get you."

"Alright." Said Sakura.

Uzumaki sidled up to the New Kid and peered over his shoulder. "Hey! That picture's nothing special!"

"Indeed, just like your penis."

"I'm going to be completely straight forward and honest!" Uzumaki yelled. "I absolutely hate you! If you have a problem with me, then quit it with the fake smile and start being straight forward and honest yourself! If you want to fight I'll take you on any time!"

"You don't understand." New Kid said. "I just don't think anything of you, one way or the other. Please go on ahead, I'll follow as soon as I've cleared things up here."

"Let me help." Sakura said, stepping smoothly in between the two boys in an effort to prevent massive amounts of violence whilst Tiger was waiting for them.

(You didn't keep Tiger waiting. You just didn't.)

She handed him a small book. "Did you also draw this?"

"Yeah." New Kid said and snatched it from her. She scented blood in the water.

"Oh really!" She grinned. "A picture book, huh? I would love to see it sometime, if you wouldn't mind."

"Actually I would." He said, far, far too quickly. "This book isn't finished yet. Also I make a point of not letting people touch this. Because it's my older brother's."

Her grin widened as the boy stalked away. It was always satisfying when she found someone's pressure point.

Sakura watched the boy's fight Tiger feeling as though she was watching a car crash in slow motion. The Uzumaki was brash and fell for basic plays, seemingly even more so with the need to prove himself better than New Kid over his head, and the New Kid was ruthless and uncaring about the Uzumaki to the point of negligence.

Watching them fail to work together and then almost come to blows just seemed inevitable. She would not, however, stand for the New Kid manipulating the Uzumaki by pushing the Sasuke button.

"What would Sasuke-kun have done in that situation? Fought while looking after you?" New kid taunted, even as he wore a horrible fake smile and his voice was flat. "As a companion and a member of team Kakashi? The one who betrayed the village and injured you, you still refer to him as a friend?"

"He would, actually." Sakura replied with a smile and the pair looked at her. She turned to the Uzumaki. "Remember, in our very first fight he saved your life and put himself as a human shield in front of me." The blonde was perking up. "And the fight against Haku, where he activated the Sharingan and then used it to stop you from getting hit, taking near fatal wounds himself in the process."

"That's right! If it's to save a friend, I'll do anything." Uzumaki said, filled with determination as he stared at the New Kid, a small smile on his face. "Even work with you."

The Uzumaki left. Sakura turned poisonous green eyes onto the New Kid.

"If the 'traitor' to the village would stick his neck out for others but you won't, what does that say about you?" She asked.

"Why do you both still care about Sasuke that much?" He asked.

"I don't." She replied easily. His eyes flickered a little in surprise. "Frankly, I'm not a very sentimental person. It takes years to get into the circle of people I really care about, and Uchiha didn't do that. I really couldn't give a shit about whether or not he comes back to the village, whether he lives or dies."

"Then why-"

"I see that orange idiot," She interrupted, pointing at the Uzumaki. "As something of a little cousin. He sees Sasuke as a brother to him and wishes to do everything in his power to bring Uchiha back. This

would not only be beneficial for the village, and therefore beneficial for the people I care about, but it's something that I genuinely believe Naruto could manage. I care about him enough to want him happy, so I do my best to encourage and help his achievable goals.

"Don't you understand Naruto's feelings?" She asked and her smile turned mean. "How far would you go to bring your brother back, if it were possible?"

(No one carried around something as unwieldy as a book everywhere if it wasn't the very last thing they had of a person.)

He smiled a horrible, fake smile. "No, not at all." He said. "I have none of what you call 'emotions'."

Sakura couldn't help it. She laughed. When she reigned herself in a hand was on the New Kid's shoulder and her face was flushed with heat. "I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be mean. Just, that's the stupidest thing anyone has ever told me."

There was a tiny furrow between the New Kids brow's.

"Sai." She said, voice serious. "If you don't have emotions, what's stopping you from simply laying down and never moving again?"

"I exist to do my duty." He said, voice flat.

"Okay but *why*?"

"I exist beca-" He started, she shook her head and interrupted him.

"No, not why you exist." She said, green eyes boring into black. "Why do you do your duty?" The furrow deepened.

"It is what I must do."

"No you don't. What's stopping you from just *not* doing it?"

"That would be betraying my village and I wou-"

"Would what? Be killed? Why would an emotionless shell care? What point is there in wasting effort on living if there's nothing driving your actions? Duty is a nebulous concept that is nothing without satisfaction, fulfilment and happiness."

"I do not know these feelings."

“Ah! But feeling and knowing what you’re feeling is different.” She pointed to the furrow in his brows. “See! That little furrow is confusion. When you’re stressed your eyes tighten here,” She pointed at the corner of an eye, “And raise just a few millimetres.” She pointed at the very corner of his mouth. “When you ate my cookies, these turned upwards just a few degrees in happiness. You’re not emotionless, you’ve just gotten too good at ignoring those emotions until you’ve forgotten how to recognise them.”

The New Kid’s brow smoothed and he put on a nonsense fake smile, but the very corners of his lips had quirked. She grinned back at him and pointed.

“There! See! The corners of your lips are smiling.”

“I did not think that was possible.” New Kid replied, tone flat but *just* a little higher pitched than usual “No one has ever read anything from my face before.”

“Those people weren’t trained by Morino Ibiki himself.” Her smile was smug.

“Come on, let’s get going.” The Uzumaki interrupted. “If we’re not there by noon tomorrow, this’ll all be for nothing!”

-

Sakura somehow wasn’t surprised that it was Kabuto on the bridge. Her mental ‘this is a trap set for Sasori by Orochimaru’ tally went up significantly. Tiger had decided it was an extremely unlikely eventuality but, well, here they were.

Morino Ibiki hadn’t gotten anything out of the kid in a month. This capture was a bust.

She watched Tiger talk to the man from under his henge- she’d taught him how to stop the chakra bleed off herself during her time on team Ro; the guy was bloody good at it, apparently his mokuton required a considerable amount of chakra control- with a growing sense of despair.

The kid was talking circles around him, likely stalling for Orochimaru to come out.

Their only hope of getting anything out of this mission was New Kid doing something interesting.

“The wind’s really strong, I can’t pick up anything they’re saying.” Uzumaki complained.

“That’s why we were able to get so close, our scent and sound are carried by the wind, so they don’t know we’re here.” Sakura said, helpfully not mentioning that her enhanced hearing could pick it up. Hopefully New Kid would underestimate her.

“Just what is he doing? Why doesn’t he go ahead with the capture already?”

“This is Kabuto we’re talking about, there’s a high chance this is a trap set up by Orochimaru. Playing into their hand by trying to capture him at the wrong moment would likely end in Kabuto’s escape and taicho’s death. He needs to be extremely careful.”

“What do you mean, a trap by Orochimaru?!” Uzumaki exclaimed.

“I think it’s not unlikely this entire thing is a trap set up to capture Sasori that we’ve wandered into.” Sakura explained.

Just as she finished, Orochimaru appeared. Sakura nodded.

“Mhm, Orochimaru trap.”

Kabuto played spy and then took out Tiger’s henge. Tiger leapt, throwing himself into the air and getting tangled by snakes only to Kawarimi out.

“He was working with Orochimaru!” The Uzumaki cried. Tiger made a signal and they leapt out of the bushes, landing as three before him.

“The Kyuubi and the pink one is here. Let’s play with them a little.” Orochimaru hissed. “I’ll give you the pleasure of telling you which has gotten stronger, you or Sasuke-kun.”

“Give Sasuke,” Uzumaki growled. “Back!”

The air was poisonous. A visible aura was bubbling around him. But it was different to any use of the Kyuubi’s chakra Sakura had ever seen. Like wearing a suit of acid rather than simply changing colours slightly. His expression lost any sense of coherency and her instincts spiked. Naruto’s scowl was pure rage.

There was *no way* that would end well.

“There is no giving him back, Naruto-kun.” Kabuto said. “Here, let me

explain it to you, Sasuke-kun came of his own free will. It's about time you got over it, going on like that it ha-"

"Oh shut up you fucking creep!" Sakura spat. She turned to Naruto. "NARUTO!" She yelled, the boiling boy turned to look at her, eyes wide and angry. "We will get Sasuke back, but we will do it *together* as Naruto and Sakura. Not the Kyuubi!"

His stance relaxed a little and the bubbling slowly begun to calm.

"If you want to know about *our* Sasuke-kun, you could try to force it out of me." Orochimaru taunted and Sakura watched with annoyance as Naruto immediately fell for it, bubbling coming back two times as strong and lips pulling back in a snarl. "If you can, that is."

Naruto launched himself across the bridge and smashed Orochimaru away, a single, bubbling tail sprouting from his aura.

"Oh my, you sure have become quite the jinchūriki, Naruto-kun." The man said, his face half ripped off to expose another face. "And that explains why you were chosen to watch over him. It would appear my experiments were of some help after all. I should think Konoha should be more appreciative, wouldn't you agree, dearest guinea pig of mine?"

Sakura turned to look at Tiger, ignoring the ensuing monologue about Orochimaru's genius.

"What the fuck does he mean, 'why you were chosen'?" She hissed quietly. Tiger grimaced.

"The mokuton can control the kyuubi." He answered she widened her eyes disbelievingly.

"Well, then fucking control it!" She gestured towards the wildly bubbling Naruto. Tiger hesitated but ultimately nodded and clapped his hands into a seal.

Naruto started screaming. He grew another two tails.

The bridge exploded and Sakura was thrown backwards in a flash of light and a wave of poisonous chakra that left her eyes burning and her ears ringing. She tried to stick to the ground, to roll, to anything but her senses were thrown completely out of whack and she couldn't tell up from down.

There was a sharp pain in the back of her head and then black.

-

She awoke to the strange feeling of moving ink under her skin, hands on her arms lifting her off the ink and setting her on wood. She opened her eyes to a nauseating blur. The world was spinning around her, her eyes catching on every tiny movement and making her head pulse painfully from the overwhelming amount of information.

Her ears, thankfully, were slowly starting to work again, the ringing dying down and the sound of panicked calls reaching her ears.

“Taicho?” She slurred.

“Sakura, are you okay?” He said, a relieved note to his voice.

“Can’t see.” She said and the hands on her arms tightened. “Naruto?”

“Across the bridge with Orochimaru.”

“You?”

“Here.”

“Why haven’t you gone after Naruto?”

“I sent a clone.”

“Is a clone capable of controlling the nine tails?”

“I can’t just leave you defenceless.”

“Taicho, I can’t see. I’m not fucking defenceless. GO AFTER NARUTO.”

“Fine, but stay here.”

“I’ll be fine.” She said and pushed herself to standing, slitting open one eye to confirm that yes, her vision was still fucked. She pulled a Hatake and pushed down her hitai-ate. She heard the distinctive sounds of leaping over wood and she walked the other direction. Soon, the tap of wood under her feet became the crush of grass.

Sakura sent out a string of chakra until it hit a tree and then walked half it’s distance. She pulled the string back to halfway between her and the tree and worked on painstakingly building a sphere web of

strings around her. Four going out from the cardinal directions and twisting, two going horizontally and two going vertically. Of the two, each covered half a sphere each.

A senbon would be able to get past it, but little else bigger would. It took considerable effort to maintain but it wasn't like she had to use the concentration on seeing, anyway. It would be just like moving through her mist, except no-one else had the same handicap and there was a nearby fight occurring between two monstrous pairs of chakra that was making sensing anything beyond their overwhelmingly huge attacks well beyond her skill level.

Simple.

She unsheathed her chokutō

Sakura heard the almost silent footsteps a mile away. The harsh crunching sounds stood out unnaturally against the gentle background of animal's movements and the wind through the plants.

Sakura lifted her chokutō and pointed it at the man the moment he stepped out of the treeline. He froze.

"Want to play, Kabuto-kun?" Sakura crooned. She heard the slightest shifting of weight backwards. "I haven't killed in a little while, I'm getting twitchy, *you* know?"

"I do." He replied, voice flat. "I saw you at the chūnin exams." Her smile widened.

"Did you? I'd wondered if you had." She said. "Did you know I got you arrested? Showing such pretty little information to the Uchiha. Tsk, tsk."

"I had thought the move worth the risks." He answered. She could hear his breathing picking up slightly. He could feel it too, then.

The bloodlust in the air.

"If it had been any normal group of genin it would have been."

"But we've never been normal." His voice was sardonic. Her smile showed too many teeth.

"I am curious though," She tilted her head. "Why is that fight happening?" She gestured to the booming noises over her shoulder.

“Ah, I fear Orochimaru-sama has grown bored recently.” He replied and she nodded.

“And you?”

“Me?”

“Have you gotten bored, Kabuto-kun?” She asked and shifted into a stance. His breathing quickened further.

“Oh *terribly.*”

His pouch rustled and a trio of shuriken flew through her web. Sakura easily deflected them with a flick of her blade. She tilted her head and pouted.

“Just checking you can actually fight like this.” He chuckled and he launched into action, blurring through her barrier and sending the distinctive swish of a kunai through the air. She flicked her sword up, blocked the kunai with the weight of an arm and half a body behind it and heard the rustle of his far shoulder and the telltale shifting of the air. She dropped into a crouch, ducking the punch, and sent a palm into his chest, pulsing it with enough chakra that the front of it exploded into chunks of blood and bone beneath it. The body flew out of her web and made the thunk and slide of hitting a tree.

“You dead?” She said, her tone bored.

“I am a very competent medical ninja.” He replied, not even sounding winded, and she snorted.

A sound appeared behind her and she twisted, slashing her blade as she skipped backwards. The kunai grazed her arm but her chokutō slashed through a thigh in return. Shunshin. Asshole.

She drove forwards, following the warmth of human flesh and the sounds of steps over grass, swiping and slashing and dodging. Most of the time she missed but some of the time she didn’t. It was always brutal.

The backs of knees, insides of elbows, thighs, stomachs, ribs.

She gained a slash over her forearm and a nasty bruise on the outside of her right thigh in return.

The man was leading her into the trees. She let him. Her webbing was

attached to herself, so it moved with her, and the extra debris in the forest would only help her out noise wise.

He figured that out pretty quickly. Tried to use a tree to sneak at her from behind, not realising that the webbing had given him away and the rustle of his clothing made him easy to track once found. He scuttled over the bark, groaning wood and almost soundless taps, and one arm of his shirt was pulled back, rubbing against his chest and with minimal movement from his hair.

She twirled at the last minute, chokutō snapping around and slicing through his neck. She *felt* it catch the bone. Just scratch it a little. But it didn't go all the way through before he shunshined away.

Sick of the smell of damp, she turned and headed back out of the forest. Back to the open bit of grass.

Footsteps appeared after a few minutes. "How are you doing that?" His voice wasn't even slightly off.

"Do you have any sensory abilities?" She asked.

"Not pleasant ones." She could hear the grimace in his voice, but also the rustle of clothing to form hand signs. "Ah. An interesting use of puppetry, certainly."

"Strings are exceedingly useful when you're creative with them." She said, her heart rate lessening. The chum in the water had dissipated, having well and truly demonstrated her ability to kill him he wouldn't let her get another chance. "Too many puppeteers get caught up in constantly improving the puppets, and they never think about the strings."

"Did Sasori get caught up like that?" He asked, overly casually.

"I wouldn't know." She said. "He only went through two puppets before I boiled his heart out."

"Ah, that is good news."

A mighty crash sounded from next to them, the burning sensation of acidic chakra filling the area.

"I also killed Deidra." She said, raising her voice over the smashing sound of rocks. "I'll probably kill quite a few more Akatsuki, but only with my eyes working. Mind helping a girl out?" She smiled winningly

at the man as the dust settled.

“It is always nice to get confirmation of Akatsuki rumours. I expect you to deliver on that promise.” He said, walking up to her. She kept a careful sense out for killing intent as he did, but as he ended up in front of her it was just the soothing warmth of medical chakra that flowed through her system.

She pushed up the hitai-ate as he stopped and smiled ferally up at the teen. “It’ll be my pleasure.”

He shunshined away. Sakura heard the running footsteps coming across the bridge and she looked over to see Tiger coming towards her and the giant, raging chakra monster next to her.

She paused. Narrowed her eyes at the trees across the bridge and scowled. The fucking creep had *improved* her eyesight.

Crowds were going to be a nightmare.

Chapter End Notes

I apologise for the lateness of this chapter. I spent the past few days drugged up to my gills and wrapped in a couch burrito as I got over tonsillitis so I couldn't actually do much of anything. Just to be clear I'm not actually sorry for falling victim to extenuating circumstances, I'm mostly just apologising just because it what you're meant to do in polite society. But you're right, my dear reader, fuck polite society.

I dOn'T apologise for not posting! Hah! Take that ScoMo!

exercise your free will to pick the only correct option

Chapter Summary

UCHIHA used THUNDERBOLT!

It's not effective...

SAKURA used THEIF!

SAKURA stole KUSANAGI from her foe!

Sakura stared down at the bloody, fleshy mess that was the Uzumaki. She shared a look with Tiger.

“You’re the fastest and infiltration is my specialty.” She pointed out. He nodded.

“I’ll get him to Konoha, you follow Sai and gather as much information as possible, then proceed as you see fit. If possible capture Uchiha Sasuke.”

“Understood, Taicho.”

“Do you need a clone?”

“I have the birds.” She replied, shaking her head.

“Good luck.” He and the Uzumaki flickered out of existence. Sakura swiped her thumb over the blood clinging to her healed forearm and sped through hand signs. A bird appeared in a puff of smoke.

“Take me to the one I had you watch.” She pointed in the general direction. “Three caterpillars.”

“Eight!”

“Three.”

“Alright.” The bird said, launching into the air as it muttered about slave drivers. It circled for a moment before flying in a single direction. Sakura activated full stealth and followed. Only stopping to pick up a small picture book from the crater.

The pursuers did not notice she had followed them. They did not notice her moving through the well hidden entrance behind them.

“You’re late.” Her ears picked up and she froze just before she turned the corner. She backed up a few steps and pressed against the wall. “Orochimaru, did you forget about how you were going to teach me a new jutsu this afternoon?” The voice was undoubtably the Uchiha’s. He had the same soft, prideful way of speech even if it had deepened considerably.

“You fail to mind your mouth, as always.” Kabuto grouched, genuine annoyance in his voice. Sakura’s lips twitched upwards.

“Oh do calm down please.” Orochimaru said. “Instead of training I happened to come across a little present for you. He’s a shinobi of the Leaf, just like you. I figured you could bathe yourself in nostalgia, talking about your old village.”

The Uchiha snorted.

“Greetings, my name is Sai.” The New Kid said. “You must be Uchi-”

“Get lost.” Uchiha interrupted.

“Even when I force myself to smile, it seems I am the type of person who ends up being hated.” The New Kid said, voice a little lower than usual. Sadness? Annoyance? Arousal? Sakura couldn’t tell. “And Naruto-kun didn’t seem to care too much for me the whole time, too. But you know, in comparison to Naruto. I think I’m going to be able to get along better with you.”

A spike of chakra. Someone gasped for breath as they fell on their ass.

“Sasuke-kun!” Admonished Kabuto.

“It would be a good idea not to tease Sasuke-kun too much. You see he’s even harder to deal with than I am.” Said Orochimaru.

“And I don’t care to deal with trash like him.” The Uchiha said, the slide of fabric accompanying a movement.

“Naruto-kun told me quite a bit about you, it seems he’s been looking for you the last three years.” New Kid pressed, his voice wavering in time with his panting.

“Oh, I guess I remember someone like that.”

Sakura had to withhold a snort. It was said with such pompous nonchalance that it was unbearably fake.

“We’re going Orochimaru.”

“Naruto considers you to be almost his own true brother, that’s what I heard from Sakura-san.”

“My brother. I only have one, a certain man I have to kill.”

“Anyhow I’ll be leaving now, Kabuto use these to compile a bingo book.” Orochimaru said, tone full of exasperation.

There were the sounds of walking, the sounds of a shunshin and the sounds of rustling pages. The problem was that Sakura couldn’t know which sound was who and she couldn’t risk stepping into the line of sight of a Sharingan user.

“These are ANBU, the Hokage’s personal troop division. These are copies of the profiles of its members.” Kabuto exclaimed. “And it would seem to be the real thing.”

There were another two sets of steps leaving.

Sakura *had* to follow. That was the ANBU list. She couldn’t leave it.

She risked it and ducked around the corner. The Uchiha wasn’t there. She followed the footsteps that resolved themselves into Kabuto and the New Kid. Kabuto had the envelope in his hand.

Convenient.

Kabuto lead the pair, knowingly and unknowingly, to a small room with a bed, desk and adjoined bathroom.

“This is your room.” Said Kabuto as he placed down the all important ANBU files and lit the single candle. “When we don’t have anything for you to do, we expect you to quietly behave yourself in here. If something comes up we will call on you.”

Sakura slammed a kunai butt into his temple and he dropped. She wasted absolutely no time binding him in ninja wire so that any attempts to escape would ultimately be useless, remembering the formidable healing he showed off during their duel and not risking that it was not working just because the teen was unconscious. She rolled him over, patted down his pockets, and slipped the door key

into her flak jacket. She turned to see New Kid with his hands in a seal and a bear drawn on a scroll in his lap, eyes flickering over the room for sign of her.

She deactivated the transparency jutsu and his wide black eyes jumped to her. She smiled sheepishly.

Sakura threw the unconscious Kabuto into the bathroom, slammed the door closed, and slapped a- very expensive- sound dampening seal on the door. (She was very lucky the missions with the Uzumaki were basically all S-rank, she might have had to budget if she suddenly went back to D or C ranks.) It would be easier to just kill the teen, but she didn't want to risk pissing off Orochimaru anymore than she was already going to. She was mostly banking on the Sannin's indifference to putting in the effort to find her to escape at the end of this.

"Sorry, hedgehog!" She said, walking over to the bed to snag the ANBU files and shove them deep into her pack. "I always forget that jutsu's activated." She leant over the teen's shoulder and looked down at the painted bear. "That's really incredible. If I wasn't a shinobi that's the kind of thing I would get as a tattoo, you know?"

His eyes went dramatically wide and they glistened with unshed tears. It was kind of disturbing. After a week of millimetre changes the difference was stark.

"You would really get this tattooed on you?" He asked, his voice much higher pitched than normal.

"If it wouldn't get me killed to have such identifying marks, absolutely." She said matter of factly. She wouldn't, tattoos were too polarising in too many social circles, but New Kid didn't need to know that.

"My chest feels warm." He said, looking down at the picture.

"That's happiness, my friend." Sakura walked over to the table and sat down at the edge of it. "Now, I am here to give you a choice. As far as I see it, you have four options.

"Option one." She held up her first finger. "You stay here, I leave, when Kabuto wakes you free him, tell him an intruder came, took the ANBU files and you fought them off. You'll probably be killed without the files but maybe not.

"Option two." Her second finger went up. "You precede with your

mission to kill Sasuke, I take the ANBU files and will not interfere with the battle, then I'll do my own thing with whoever is left.

"Option three." Her third finger went up. "You simply leave. I have probably ten minutes or so of work to do here but after that you'd be welcome to accompany me back to Konoha, or you could go wherever. I'm happy to say that Sasuke killed you if you wanted to move to Iwa to paint birds or something.

"Option four." Her fourth finger went up. "You attempt to capture Sasuke. I aid you in this endeavour, I'd reckon there's a fifty fifty chance we'd succeed, though the moment Orochimaru shows up we're ditching. Then we leave and again you could go wherever."

The New Kid seemed very overwhelmed. Only noticeable by the tiniest draw in of the brows and parting of the lips.

"Why would you lie about my death for me?" He asked and she grinned.

"Well, for one, I'm pretty into free will. People are much, much more interesting when they're not just bowing under the choices others make for them, and you don't seem like you've gotten much of a choice otherwise." Her grin turned scheming. She wasn't lying. She did always find it interesting the kinds of options people would choose, even if she didn't actually let them go through with those choices. "And secondly, my taicho ordered me to proceed as I saw fit after entering the compound and gather information, so if I see fit to lie to the Hokage for a friend and stop at the hot springs on the way back to Konoha that's perfectly within my mission parameters." She frowned. "I would totally lie for you even if it wasn't, I just wouldn't stop at the hot springs."

"There is a fifth option you haven't mentioned."

"There is?" She asked.

"I could attack you and take the files, thus ensuring my original plan comes to fruition." He didn't sound particularly serious about it, more like he was just evaluating all his options, but she still felt a hot spike of anger all the same. New Kid was on thin ice, his usefulness draining more and more every time he mentioned turning her personal information of people she cared about to the enemy.

"No." She said, voice firm.

“It’s simply an op-”

“I’m telling you, it’s not.” She hissed. “You try to even set a finger on those files again and I promise there won’t even be a fingernail left of your body when I’m done with you.” Killing intent filled the room but she pulled it in quickly. Leery of setting off anyone’s senses.

“Why do you care so much about them?” New Kid asked, his eyes wider than normal.

“Because if I hadn’t taken it out before we got here, I would be one of them.” She said, not actually revealing anything beyond what you could find out in the village gossip rounds, and his eyes widened even further. “And I couldn’t take out all of my teammates.”

“There is a sharp pain in my chest when I think of my actions.” He said and she smiled softly.

“That’s regret. It means your sorry. Thank you.” She said and he nodded, eyes narrowing infinitesimally in DETERMINATION.

“I want to capture Uchiha Sasuke to take him back to Konoha for the sake of my teammates and friends.”

She almost audibly sighed in response, feeling a wave of disappointment at the answer. She’d been looking forward to throwing New Kid at the Uchiha and seeing how long he could survive, but orders were orders and her best chance of capturing Uchiha was unfortunately with help so she made sure to cheer happily instead.

“Alright! Oh, I nearly forgot.” She rummaged through her pack and threw him the small book.

“You found it.” He said, holding it gently.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t look through it, your porn stash remains unseen.” She winked.

He blushed. Just the tiniest dusting of pink on the tips of his ears and across the tops of his cheekbones that was oddly adorable.

“Totally a hedgehog.” She muttered and walked over to the bathroom door.

She threw it open to find Kabuto still tied up but with his ear pressed to the wood. He collapsed onto the ground and lines of red appeared

down his arms.

“Where is Uchiha Sasuke?”

“He should be done with his training about now and back in his inner chamber. There are a large number of rooms strewn throughout the lair. If you end up looking in each as you go, you might find him.” Kabuto said, a nasty grin on his face. “Still, if you aren’t careful, you might chance upon a snake as well. Orochimaru keeps his quarters in about the same area, after all.”

“Thank you for your honesty.” She replied and made to swing the door into his face but halted it at the last minute. She slowly swung it back open, eyes narrowed considerably. “We’re not going to kill him, just show him the power of love and friendship and punching and take him back to Konoha. And just because you healed me.” She then pushed further inside the room with a foot, stopping him from taking the door to his face, and then slammed it closed.

Sakura turned to New Kid.

“Alright, I don’t suppose you have any way of finding him? My birds are useless underground.”

“I do.” He then bent down and drew a clean scroll and ink, painting tiny mice all over it before holding a seal and releasing them. They sprinted out the door and ran in different directions. After around five minutes or so he opened his eyes and nodded.

She grinned. As they left she locked the room door, kindly leaving the key in the middle of the floor.

“Keep your chakra level until the fight, if we get into a bad situation I can emergency shunshin us out but it’ll use most of my energy reserves.” She said as she followed him down the corridors. “My stealth doesn’t work against the Sharingan so count that out, but if you provide long range support I’ll be able to hold him off from your position. And a reminder, Orochimaru shows up, we take the first opportunity to leave.”

He nodded.

They spent the remainder of the jog in silence, until they came across a door and he stopped. She gestured for him to go ahead. She had no chance sneaking up on a Sharingan user as she was.

He painted a series of snakes and sent them crawling in.

“Who’s there?” Came the soft voice of the Uchiha.

“Caught me redhanded. Still, I’ve already acquired the upper hand.” New Kid said.

“What is it that you want?”

“I intend to take you back to Konoha!” He answered, the beginnings of a genuine smile on his face. “Although I did originally come here in order to kill you, I want to work to make my own decisions with the support of my friends.”

“Friends?” The voice whispered. “You woke me up to talk about friends?”

He’d been sleeping? Sakura scowled. She hadn’t even considered that possibility considering it was mid-afternoon and still very, very bright outside. She totally could have grabbed him whilst he’d slept.

Ah well, at least the fight should be fun.

New Kid pumped chakra into his technique to counter the Uchiha’s own surge and the building exploded. Sakura grabbed New Kid and punched upwards through a chunk of rock to land them both on top of the caved in stone.

“You live up to your reputation.” New Kid said. “To be able to overpower my jutsu is quite something.” He straightened and stood beside her. “But I am not alone.”

“Ah, is it Sakura?” The Uchiha said, Sharingan pinwheeling lazily.

“Sasuke-kun.” She crooned mockingly, a mimic of the night he left. Maybe it was because of her time with the New Kid but the way the Uchiha’s brows furrowed just slightly in anger was immediately obvious.

“Does that mean the others are here as well?”

“Just us. Naruto tried but our taicho had to take him to hospital after a fight on the way here and Kakashi was already in the hospital when we left. Team Seven luck, you know how it is.” Sakura waved a hand dismissively. “But Sasuke-kun! I just want to say I was watching the fight at the valley of the end.” His expression pinched. “And I’m

proud, you didn't kill Naruto. Maybe you aren't a hypocrite.

"But you know what else you aren't?" She said, drawing and pointing her chokutō at the teen. Her voice went dangerously flat. "A Mangyekou Sharingan wielder. And that means I can beat you."

New Kid had pulled out a scroll, brush and ink, retreating to the back of the fighting area. Completely trusting she would keep the Uchiha away from him.

Sasuke moved in a blur of movement but Sakura tracked it, swung under the arm he raised and slashed her chokutō towards his kidneys. Sasuke pivoted, ducking backwards to dodge and drew his own blade. Sakura danced backwards as he gave chase, dodging blows rather than blocking them, as ink created animals slithered and scurried over the ground.

Just as they swarmed up Sasuke's legs she stepped inwards and blocked a swipe with her sword, intending to follow it up with a fist to the gut.

It didn't block. The sword simply went *through* her chokutō.

Sakura leapt backwards and stared in horror at the half of a sword in her hands. She looked back up to a smug looking Sasuke, who was bursting lightning chakra out of his body to destroy the ink animals.

"Your choice of defence. Quite the mistake." He said, lightning crackling around him. "You see, this sword, Kusanagi, I hold here is a little special. It's the kind that can't be blocked." The lightning chakra wound down.

Despite its resemblance to her own enhanced state, it seemed to prevent him from moving and instead do an area of effect attack. It was a pity for him she was a lightning type. She took the opportunity to throw off her shoes.

"Does it conduct chakra?" She asked.

"Of course." He answered, as if any other answer was inconceivable to him. She smiled, threw her sword to the side and dumped the sheath.

"I'll be taking that one then." She said, and spread her elemental transformation over herself, feeling the familiar buzzing of energy hastening her cells.

Sasuke's eyes widened but he was quickly distracted by a swarm of birds, having to swing wildly at them with a lightning coated sword and jump backwards to avoid their attacks. Sakura took the opportunity to dash into his guard, slipping in between an attack and smashing one palm towards his sword welding elbow and the other towards his stomach. He avoided the elbow hit and but got caught on the gut and went flying.

It shouldn't injure him- giving him a burst stomach was not conducive to capture- but it would wind him.

She darted forwards at the same time as three man-sized ink-wolves came in from the other three cardinal directions. Sasuke braced and, just as they were about to hit, he threw out another wave of lightning chakra from all over his body.

The ink wolves melted but Sakura had been expecting it. She channeled the electricity into her hands and down through her feet and into the ground, the move causing cracklings of lightning through her own blue rings of storm. It was exceptionally difficult to do, even most lightning users couldn't achieve it without taking some damage, but this was the kind of shit Sakura was good at.

Sasuke's eyes widened and he attempted to throw himself backwards but Sakura had caught the wrist of his sword arm and slammed her other hand into its elbow. The careful pulse of pressurised chakra bent the arm violently in the wrong direction and he screamed, dropping the sword. She caught it and twirled, aiming for a non-lethal thing slash, but he managed to just barely through himself backwards to dodge it. A good pain tolerance then. Sakura wondered how, exactly, Orochimaru had been teaching him.

Eyes wide and brows pushed low in anger, he grabbed the bottom of his broken arm and pulled it straight with another bitten off scream, even as she chased him from rock to rock. She was pretty annoyed that without ink monsters attacking him he was faster than her, easily reading her movements with his Sharingan, but she supposed that was why she hadn't planned to do this alone.

Sasuke launched forward, good arm aiming to punch at her. His eyes spun in dizzying circles. She moved to 'dodge' but really just kept him in line with the ink monkey that launched itself onto his head, clawing at his shoulders and pulling at his bad arm. Sasuke *freaked* and started sparking bursts of lightning wildly from seemingly random tenketsu. Sakura rammed the end of the sword towards his temple at

the same time she pulled the sheath out of the back of his... belt?

She had just hit him, sending him tumbling into unconsciousness and towards the ground, when he disappeared and reappeared being carried like a sack under one arm by Orochimaru, Kabuto appearing next to him and looking down at the very beaten up boy disapprovingly.

Sakura sheathed her new sword, body-flickered next to the now standing New Kid and grabbed his arm, quickly covering him in chakra in preparation for an emergency shunshin. Bless the sweet, smart kid, he'd settled his chakra to make it easier for her as soon as she'd appeared next to him.

"That wasn't very polite." Orochimaru said, voice strangely bemused.

"Maybe, but to be fair we didn't kill him." She said. "Just gave him some lessons on not using lightning against a lightning type. And spacial awareness."

Orochimaru's head tilted. "True."

Wait, he was actually buying into this?

"But you also took his sword."

"Then he should get it back." She said determinedly. "You gave it to him, right?"

"Yes." He replied warily.

"Then this is a great lesson about taking care of his things." She said. "I mean you gave him what is the clearly the coolest sword in existence and he just drops it mid-battle?"

"You did break his arm quite violently."

"Then he should work to break my arm in return. He'll never be a good body if he just comes crying to you every time something goes wrong!"

"He has become more entitled lately." Orochimaru nodded, eyeing the mass destruction of what likely used to be a very expensive base.

"Exactly! Letting me keep the sword and making him battle for it will teach him independence and humility. And we promise to kill lots of Akatsuki if you let us leave!" She held up her available pinky and gave

a winning smile. New Kid held up his own available pinky alongside his typical bland expression. “Pinky promise!”

“Don’t be daft girl!” The man snarled, Kabuto leant closer to him and whispered. It was a good thing Sakura had such fantastic hearing.

“She was the one who killed Sasori and Deidara.” Orochimaru’s eyes widened.

“You’re the boiler?!” He exclaimed. Sakura grimaced.

“Is that what they’re calling me? I’m far more partial to Null-Storm myself.” She said.

“You’re the Null-Storm?!” The snake Sannin’s eyes zeroed in on the scars on her cheek.

“...no?” She tried. He just smiled, a vision full of teeth.

“We’ll let you two go.” He snarled and Sakura felt the relief settle into her very bones. “But we’ll also tip off Akastuki!”

“No!” She yelled but they were already gone in a wave of fire. “Assholes!”

“I thought they didn’t want to help Akatsuki?” New Kid asked, packing up his gear as she begun to pick her way towards her shoes and sword pieces.

“They don’t. Akatsuki is filled with the kind of chauvinistic, contemptible people that will hear ‘this girl killed two of your members’ and think ‘I want to throw myself at them to test my strength!’, so they’ll likely all line up one by one for me to kill them now.”

“I do not understand.”

“That’s a good thing, that means you have more common sense than pride.” She strapped on her shoes and wrapped her pieces of chokutō up in a torn off sleeve. “Unfortunately, the really strong people of the world often start strong and only get stronger, meaning that they’re almost never beaten and gain an overly inflated ego. Once someone comes along to challenge their sense of self by being stronger than them, they either self implode and give up entirely or they throw themselves at the challenge over and over again until they win and the world is righted one more.”

“So they are idiots.”

“Yep! The people to truly worry about are the ones who used to be weak but have become strong through hard work. The people like Sasuke. They remember what it was like to be beaten into the dirt and they will fight all the dirtier because of it. Uchiha hasn’t quite worked out fighting dirty yet, but I’m fairly certain that’s because of puberty rather than his actual personality.”

“That may be true. Even members of ROOT have grown strange as they hit the later teen years.”

“You say that as if you haven’t.”

“I have not noticed any changes.”

“You spent the entire mission getting into pissing contests with Naruto, purposefully riling him up in an attempt to prove your *manly* superiority.”

“I... haven’t, haven’t I?”

“Rethink your behaviour of the last few days against the best possible chance of success for the mission.”

“...I have behaved illogically.”

“And that’s a good thing. Logic only fails when there are emotions in the mix, now you just have to be able to figure out what those emotions are.”

“I will do my best.”

“I believe in you!”

-

“I see.” The Hokage said. “And the reason it took so long to make it here?”

“Fatigue and the need for remedial hot water therapy, Hokage-sama.” Sakura replied, voice monotone and face blank.

“You stopped at the hot springs.” The Senju deadpanned.

“Taicho did say I could act however I saw fit.” Sakura continued, keeping her voice and face blank.

"I'm docking your pay for this." Sakura couldn't help the way her hand tightened protectively around her cool new sword. The Senju's eyes flickered to the movement and her face became exasperated. "I'm not taking the sword you can keep the bloody thing. I'll dock a c-rank's worth from your mission payment." Sakura's hand loosened in relief.

"And so...?" The Hokage addressed to the room at large, the heavily bandaged Uzumaki predictably stepping forward to be loud and distracting. Sakura briefly wondered what that would look like at old age.

She vowed to never, ever wonder such a thing again.

"We aren't giving up!" He cried determinedly.

"Very well."

-

Sakura climbed in through the window with great difficulty. She had to essentially go in head first and use her feet on the top of the frame to push herself through. She landed with her head on the ground and the legs flopped over the top of the giant plushy.

After a moment of wiggling, she managed to free herself and pushed up to standing, placing the black and white hedgehog plushy next to the other four on the end of the bed. The end of the bed was now half of the bed.

"Hi sensei!" She said cheerfully before pausing. He was sitting up, which was a much better sign than last time, and he was wearing a suspiciously familiar looking tank top with mask combination. "Are you wearing an ANBU uniform. As pyjamas?"

Hatake glanced down at the top, patted it a little and looked back at her. Zero shame in the lone open eye. "It's soft." She snorted.

It was soft, yes, because they were ridiculously expensive.

"How do you even get them to make them with the mask?" She asked, pulling her customary chair over to the side of the bed from the far corner of the room. For some reason shinobi had a habit on perching on far away walls and window sills when they came to visit people, like they were afraid being injured was catching.

"I threatened to quit." He answered, flipping a page in Icha Icha.

"And now that you're not ANBU?"

"They think I'll come back if they're nice to me." He said and she chuckled, settling into her chair with a yawn. "Who's the hedgehog?"

"New Kid." She said, gesturing to the plushy lazily. "Pokey on the outside, squishy goodness on the inside."

"Does New Kid have a name?"

"He was assigned Sai but I don't know if he actually likes it so I've been calling him New Kid or Hedgehog." She rubbed a hand through her hair, the scalp smarting after having been in braids all day. "He's pretty cool, but you'll destroy him." An eyebrow was raised and a page turned. "He has zero social skills. Zero. Doesn't understand humour or sarcasm or jokes at all."

"Aah." Hatake said, the noise sounding alarmingly excited. "And Tenzō?"

"Tenzō has yet to earn a plushy." Sakura said, gaining two raised eyebrows. "He flubbed his first mission. He's got to gain back some respect." She held out for a half minute. "But he's totally a racoon, soft and cute and friendly until he's suddenly demonic."

"Mhm." The noise was agreeable so Sakura mentally clapped herself on the back for nailing it.

After a few more minutes of comfortable silence spent sitting and staring sleepily out the window, Hatake dropped the book and turned an exasperated eye on her. "Did anything interesting happen on the mission?" He deadpanned and Sakura grinned, pushing forward to lean on her elbows whilst she excitedly explained the past week to him.

-

"...And I know I couldn't actually see, but I *know* I hit his neck. I *felt* the sword scrape bone, so it had have gone almost all the way through but he just returned five minutes later, nothing apparently the matter.

"So then we had this weird creepy bonding session and I convinced the creep to heal my eyes, since otherwise I couldn't go on with the mission and they wanted me around to kill Akatsuki anyway, and he

improved them. *Drastically*.

“It’ll be great for missions, but I was already having problems dealing with the sheer amount of movement in Konoha...”

-

“This time I was the one who befriended and converted New Kid to our side, Naruto didn’t pull his weight at all!”

-

“And then he got all gross and teary eyed because I said I would get a tattoo of his drawing if I wasn’t a shinobi...”

-

“...Kashi, would it be weird if I buried my Chokutō?”

“There’s a hill dedicated to weapons in the cemetery.”

-

“So I convinced Orochimaru that Sasuke was a small, bratty child in his care-”

“Not entirely inaccurate.”

“And letting me keep his things after he ‘discards’ them was an appropriate punishment for the boy.”

A Raccoon Earns Its Place

Chapter Summary

Sakura instigates the spread of wildly fantastical rumours about Hatake and Tiger, encourages a stalker to torment her newest friend and tells her kidnapper that his clothing choices make him look like a clown.

Chapter Notes

CW: frank mentions of the possibility of sexual assault

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Hey, Hedgehog!” Sakura called, sitting in the chair across from the New Kid, dumping ‘the evolution of textiles in South-East Earth Country’ on the table in front of her and drawing a slightly (very, very, slightly) incredulous look from him.

The stuff was interesting, not to mention surprisingly useful during infiltration missions.

“Sakura-san.” He said blandly and she eyed the books about interpersonal relationships before grinning and cracking open her own.

“Oh! That reminds me, Naruto and I are going to visit Kakashi-sensei at the hospital. Did you want to come too?”

“Kakashi-sensei.” He murmured.

“You are in Team Kakashi. It’s only fair you be included in seeing sensei in hospital after every Team Seven mission.”

“He is Hatake Kakashi?”

“He’s extremely good at what he does, it’s just there’s a cloud of bad luck that hangs over our team like a virus.”

New Kid did not yet understand.

-

“Naruto!” Sakura called. Uzumaki turned to her and groaned.

“What the... what is Sai doing here?”

“I ran into him at the library. He is team Kakashi.”

“Jeez, and I was planning for us two to go on a walk, almost like a da-!”

“No.”

“Ahh, but Sakura-chaaaaan.”

“Na-Naruto. Sakura.” New Kid interjected. “Would you mind if I joined the conversation as well?” He was blushing, light dustings of rose over his cheek bones and ear tips. “Ahh! Er! I read in the book about people getting to know people and stuff...” He was blushing even harder, but somehow it wasn’t getting redder, the light pink colour was just spreading. It was oddly fascinating. “It said that I should drop suffixes or use nicknames and such, by doing so it creates feelings of closeness, allowing people to become friends quickly.”

“Hey, Sai, I didn’t think you actually cared about that stuff.”

“But while I thought about it for a bit, I couldn’t think about good nicknames for you two, so for now I just drop the suffixes and...”

“Nicknames aren’t something you think about, they just happen naturally.”

“Not necessarily, I call Sai Hedgehog after I thought about it for a while during our first meeting.” Sakura said. “If you’re going to make a nickname then you usually use someone’s characteristics or just something you associate with them. Like Naruto would be ‘orange boy’ or maybe ‘clone man’?”

“Hmmm.” Uzumaki said and rubbed his chin. “Too boring.”

“Thanks I think I got the hang of it...” New Kid said with a small smile. “Pink shorty.”

Sakura wilted. A devastated expression crossed her face.

Her lone weakness.

Somehow she found herself shuffled into Hatake’s room in the midst of her despondency and directed to stand next to the bed. She drew herself back to the present with an almost inaudible sigh, shaking her head at Hatake’s questioning eyebrow raise. His eye narrowed,

displeased, but she just pouted slightly and slumped further. He relented the line of questioning with a blink, flicking his gaze over to the boys.

They stood at the end of the bed, eyeing the stuffed animals at the end of Hatake's bed warily. New Kid broke from his shock for a moment to shoot a concerned and slightly guilty look. Well Sakura could read the guilt, the micro expression was so micro it was barely existent so she doubted anyone else could.

"Why do you have all these stuffed toys, sensei?" Uzumaki asked.

"Maa, apparently flowers are boring."

"Who's visiting you so much? Is it a-"

"Ah, so this is our new teammate?" Hatake interrupted the orange teen. Sakura's brows furrowed. Did Uzumaki not visit Hatake? Was this less 'let's go as a team and talk about our mission and future together' and more 'let's go visit sensei for the first time' for him?

She resolved to bring more cookies for the man next time he ended up in hospital.

"Sai, was it? Nice to meet you." Hatake drawled, his tone icy under the laziness and a little too much of his chakra seeping into his aura, leaving the air thick with tension to anyone even passably trained as a shinobi.

Apparently he'd been able to read the guilt.

"Thank you." New Kid said, face and voice impassive even as a film of sweat formed on his brow.

There was only one real explanation for this level of terror, considering she'd seen him come face to face with Orochimaru with barely a tensing of his expression. Sakura knew first hand the kind of hero worship there was for Hatake in the ANBU, but apparently that extended to ROOT as well. She side-eyed the man. Had he ever been in ROOT? It would explain his reaction to finding out about New Kid.

"Umm." Naruto started, apparently entirely oblivious to his surroundings. "Kakashi-sensei. About our last mission, it-"

"I've already heard everything from Yamato. He told me about Sasuke as well." Hatake interrupted, his chakra pulled back into himself and

the pressure in the air lessening.

“We don’t have any time left. At this rate, just a bit longer, he’ll...”

“Where we’re at we could collectively defeat Sasuke, but we couldn’t get him away from Orochimaru. Not to mention the growing threat Akatsuki is posing.” Sakura said. “Our enemies are multiplying at the same rate they’re getting stronger.”

“It that case, you only need to become stronger than them, right?” Hatake said, still not taking his eyes away from the porn. “You don’t just think I’ve been sleeping here without thinking, have you? I was thinking the whole time.

“Still this particular method is best suited for someone like Naruto. Or rather. I should say that this training is only really something only he’s capable of doing. With this training Naruto, you might even surpass me, in a way of speaking.”

“Surpass you?”

“That’s right. I’ll be by your side through all of this training. And... it’s completely different from any training you’ve done before.”

“Wha-what will we be doing?”

“Making you an ultimate ninjutsu. That is to say making you a ninjutsu that is even more powerful than the rasengan. But, to get power like that requires a massive amount of time and work. You won’t get super strong in a few days like out of a book and it’s not a jutsu like you’ve learned before. Like the rasengan. Where you were steered through every step slowly so you could get to it.”

“You say that we need a massive amount of time and energy, but we don’t have that! Sasuke’s about to be-”

“I’ve come up with a way to minimise time.”

“H-how?”

“Well...”

“How are you doing Kakashi?!” Sarutobi cried, strolling through the door.

“Hi!” Said the Akimichi.

“Asuma-sensei, at least knock!” The Yamanaka yelled.

The Sarutobi’s eyes ran over the bed, landed on the hedgehog plushy and lit up in delight, his face stretching into a grin as he pointed at it. “Another one!” He said. “Are you going to tell us where they keep appearing from?”

In the background the Nara was experiencing war flashbacks at the New Kid.

“Maa, who knows.” Hatake drawled.

“Eh, why’s everyone so interested in the plushies?” Uzumaki asked, as if the first thing he’d done upon walking into the room wasn’t comment on the plushies.

“This is the mystery of the stuffed animal admirer!” The jōnin boomed with an appropriate sense of drama. “It started ever since he was in a coma after the chūnin exams,” He described to the rapt audience of chūnin, Sakura raised an eyebrow at Hatake where she knew it wouldn’t be seen by the others. He didn’t look at her directly but raised the Icha Icha a centimetre higher in response. “Where every few days a mysterious plushy in the exact shape and outfit of one of his ninken would appear. Then, ever since, every time Kakashi has ended up in the hospital at least one weirdly specific plushy will appear at the foot of his bed. No one knows who’s bringing them because Kakashi refuses to tell anyone, and Gai probably knows but bursts into tears any time it’s brought up.” He trailed off mysteriously.

“But why wouldn’t Kakashi-sensei want people to know?” Sakura asked, eyes widened innocently and her voice pitched just right to make herself seem younger but not obnoxious.

“Ah, well we’re pretty sure whoever’s giving them is an embarrassing lover of some kind.” Asuma said and her eyes widened in shock. He got that particular ‘these genin don’t even know what it feels like to stab someone’ expression on his face when he looked at her and Sakura internally cheered. The man had effectively completely forgotten that she was the same military rank as the man and the massive amount of rumours about her making and thriving in ANBU. She discretely shifted her weight so that her pastel green dress hung to cover the arm with the giant fuck-off bite scar.

Also this jōnin really needed to get better gossip, Hatake clearly just wanted to fuck with people and kept digging himself in deeper and deeper until his only option was grabbing a shovel and continue

digging desperately even as he was buried in the sweet, mouldy earth.

“This set is clearly team Kakashi.” The Nara said.

“How did you figure that out?” Sakura asked, all innocent and sweet like. Nara shot her a dirty look.

“The colours, for one.” He said and most of the gathered chūnin nodded. Sakura made a little surprised ‘o’ with her face. Out of the corner of her eye Hatake was slowly sinking beneath the covers.

Dig, Hatake, dig.

“And Naruto is obviously the toad and Kakashi is the wolf, but I don’t know what the others mean.”

“Well, that’s a cuckoo.” Sakura pointed to the bird. “Which is my summons. But the only people who know that are either in this room or Yamato-taicho.”

“And Hedgehog is my nickname.” New Kid added.

“Yeah and the only other person who knows that about Sai is Yamato-taicho!” Uzumaki added (*extremely*) helpfully.

“Come to think of it, the only person not included in the plushies is Yamato-taicho.” Sakura said.

“It would be weird to get one for yourself.” Uzumaki squinted down at the pile.

“Asuma-san,” Sakura asked, drawing the man away from poking the hedgehog plushie to look at her. “Is sensei in an, um, embarrassing l-love affair with Yamato-taicho?” Her cheeks blushed with careful warming circles of chakra beneath her skin.

The Sarutobi scratched his beard thoughtfully and narrowed his eyes at the small tuft of silver hair peaking out of the covers, mostly covered by an Icha Icha. “It’s possible.

“You guys go ahead to Yakiniku Q. Team Kakashi, you go with them.” Sarutobi said to a round of cheers. “I’ve got something to talk to Kakashi about, so the Yakiniku’s on me.”

The figure under the sheets visibly shuddered. Sakura leaned over and poked a shoulder. “See ya, sensei!” She couldn’t quite keep the humour out of her voice.

The trip to barbecue was mostly detached conversations, the Akimichi and Nara having a serious looking conversation with New Kid, and Uzumaki babbling about the training he'd seemed to have forgotten Hatake hadn't actually told him anything about.

The Yamanaka fell into step beside her as they walked the streets. A surprise considering the chūnin on Team Asuma usually made an effort not to be alone with her, something about Nara's insistence Sakura would murder them all in their sleep, and Yamanaka typically showed nothing but outright disdain towards her.

"So, who's the cute new guy?" Yamanaka asked with a mischievous smile on her lips.

...Was this girl talk? Was that why Yamanaka had singled her out? Or had she just been decided a better information source than Uzumaki?

Sakura was about to warn her off New Kid when she paused and actually considered it. He could use someone as well versed in psychology and as incessant as Yamanaka on his side.

"I think you'd actually get on really well." Sakura said and the Yamanaka looked skeptically at her. "His name is Sai but I call him hedgehog because his core is squishy goodness but it's surrounded by a layer of spiky... well you'll figure it out. He is, in essence, a challenge." The Yamanaka looked conflicted. "Plus, the very tips of his ears go this soft pink colour when he blushes."

She was sold. Sakura *knew* that would work because the Uchiha did it once during their academy days and the Yamanaka had cried about it for weeks.

They arrived at the barbecue and Sakura took the end seat, noticing the empty one in front of her.

"Where's Shikamaru?"

"He went home cause he had to help his dad get some antlers to use for medicines." The Akimichi said.

"He never has any problems showing up for mission briefings. It's really weird." The Yamanaka said.

"Who even cares about that lazy idiot?" Uzumaki whined.

"Hmph, well anyway we should introduce ourselves to Sai-kun first."

“Please do.” The New Kid had put on his worst fake smile, the one that meant he was trying way too hard, and Sakura felt a burst of unholy glee in anticipation.

“Um, I’m Akimichi Choji. Nice to meet ya Sai.”

“Nice to meet you too, um...” Sakura leaned forward in eager anticipation as he paused. “Tub-” The Uzumaki’s hand slapped over his mouth.

“Don’t say ‘tubby’ in front of Choji ever! Got it?” He hissed through his teeth. New Kid looked extremely confused and most definitely had not ‘got it’ but nodded anyway.

“I’m Yamanaka Ino from Yamanaka flower shop!” The blonde greeted, smiling bashfully at the oblivious boy.

“Nice to meet you... um... pretty lady.” He said and the Yamanaka sparkled.

Poor, innocent New Kid had no idea what kind of iron maiden he’d just strapped himself into.

-

“So, since Kakashi-san is still in the hospital-” Tiger started. Uzumaki was eyeing him with a complicated expression. The rumours about Tiger and Hatake’s illicit love affair were, of course, still making their way around the village shinobi and were getting progressively more insane by the day.

Yesterday, she heard a chūnin whispering about how they had tried to get married, only to discover they were secretly long-lost brothers and had ever since been continuing their relationship in secret, doing everything possible to hide their shame from their fellow Konoha shinobi.

“Why is Kakashi-sensei still in the hospital?” Sakura asked. She hadn’t been able to get a straight answer out of the man.

“Apparently there was some unrecommended Sharingan use that set him back.” Tiger answered and she nodded. “I’ll be acting as team leader for this mission...”

-

Sakura was thrown into a basement unceremoniously, her hands and feet tied and a gag in her mouth. The restrictive kimono she was wearing prevented her from landing smoothly and she earned a bruise on her left knee.

She got a quick glance at a room full of similarly bound girls ranging from terrified to completely hysterical before the trapdoor slammed shut and the room fell into total darkness.

She slipped out of the ropes binding her hands, untied the binds around her feet, and pulled the gag down to her neck. She stretched to standing and formed a ring of dripping blue goo around her hand, lighting up the space as her eyes examined it.

Aside from the lone trapdoor about two metres above her head, the room just looked like a concrete box. She paced from one side to the other, double checking there weren't any hidden entry ways.

Sakura sighed.

She strode towards the girls, they all shied backwards at her approach. Of the eight, one was the most gaunt looking and seemed less terrified and more resigned.

Bingo.

She strode over, ignoring the stench of piss and shit, and ripped down the girl's gag.

"How long have you been here?"

"F-four days." The girl rasped.

"Has anyone been taken out in that time?"

"Three girls."

"How?"

She lifted shaking, bound hands to the trapdoor and pointing. "There's a platform and a pulley system."

"Fucking hell." Sakura swore, pushing back to standing as she unpicked the sleeve hem of her kimono with her teeth.

"Are you here to save us?" The weak voice of the girl asked from behind her. Sakura turned and shoved the gag back in place.

“I’m being paid to capture the bad guys.” Sakura said, voice toneless. “I really don’t give two shits about all of you, but you might be saved in the process.”

She pulled the hidden razor from the fabric and worked on tearing slices from the dress, cutting off the sleeves where they started to flare, shortening the hem to mid thigh, and ditching the obi, instead tying the top in place with a strip from the abandoned sleeves.

All in all it covered the important, secret parts of her body (literally just the ANBU tattoo, shinobi don’t have time to worry about modesty) and would keep her clothed enough to not freak out the teenage boys on her team, whilst giving her something she could properly fight in.

She reabsorbed the storm chakra, climbed up the wall and activated full stealth once she felt her hand brush the trapdoor. Her eyes closed and she stopped breathing, stretching her hearing as far as she could.

There was the sounds of two sets of breathing, shifting wood, and playing cards just outside. Footsteps, complaining, breathing, a loud banging noise further out. Everything muddled by the overlying layer of whimpering and breathing from the girls.

Sakura sighed. She had been hoping she would be able to sneak out and look through the gang’s stuff to pass the time. She could shunshin out, but she couldn’t hold the transparency jutsu through the movement and it was frankly too great of a risk.

She would have to wait. She settled against the ceiling, sticking close to the trapdoor.

Maybe the guards would dump another girl down here and she could sneak out then.

She had no such luck. Instead, Sakura waited for a very boring three hours before shouting and the general noises of the Uzumaki being loud and distracting caught her ears. She waited until the footsteps above had passed the trapdoor before she punched it open.

The two men above her were staring at the exploded wood in terror, blades drawn and slack jawed. Sakura, basically invisible, simply walked behind them and smashed their head together. The pair crumbled. She hogtied them with strips from a convenient pile of rope- she assumed it was for use to tie the girls or whatever the ‘pulley system’ was- slinging the rest of the rope over her body.

She stole one of their swords on her way out. She swung it experimentally once, twice and grimaced. It was little more than a lopsided metal stick.

She missed her chokutō. She missed Kusanagi. She'd only been able to risk taking the razor for this infiltration, the risk of the kidnappers discovering even a cavity scroll before she was taken to the main hideout too high. She looked down at the sword.

She wasn't allowed to kill any of the members anyway.

Sakura positioned her thumbs against the edge of the handle, as if to snap off the metal, and pulsed a vertical release of chakra as she pushed, cleanly breaking off the blade. The handle was nothing more than a chunk of wood in her hand, but it will be of more use than the terrible metal.

She stalked through the compound, flitting from room to room silently and almost entirely invisibly.

The people she came across were knocked out and hogtied, the large majority of them non-fighters that had hidden or tried to escape in place of holding back the attackers, and soon she was standing behind the enemy lines of the fight.

There were about fifteen enemy shinobi- missing-nins who'd joined the gang, and the reason such a heavy hitting team had been required- and twenty or so non-shinobi fighters left on the battlefield. Across from them, Tiger had trapped them in with an earth wall and was using mokuton to try and capture them, but was being hampered by their numbers and a particularly skilled fire user. New Kid was creating ink monsters that were battling the groups of enemies, trying to drive them into Tiger's awaiting traps, and Uzumaki was using groups of clones to try and take them down.

It was a stalemate. The enemies were surprisingly capable at working together, small teams of three moving together seamlessly to defend the warehouse, and in particular the fire user was extremely skilled, sending walls of flames at just the right times to pop a large number of clones or burn a large amount of wood. Tiger could use a water release to combat him, but their abilities were hampered by not being allowed to kill any of the enemies. There were no surrounding rivers or lakes, and using a large amount of chakra to create a water release that wouldn't be allowed to kill the enemy would just be giving any enemies with a water affinity free material to use with very little

chakra drain, whilst also fucking up Tiger's own stores.

They had too little information to progress more aggressively, and the enemy was too skilled to allow them to make it any further whilst being as careful as they were.

Sakura sighed. This would be much easier if she could simply cut her way through, but for now she needed to take out the fire user. She dumped the leftover rope. It would be too unwieldy for her attack.

She crept through the enemy ranks, dodging attacks, slipping through gaps between their people and at one point being forced to slide under a man's grip on another's shoulder, just barely making it through without touching anything. She couldn't risk jumping or running, both would create too much air movement and potentially give away her presence, and she was having to lower and raise her body temperature repeatedly, causing her limbs and face to burn.

In Tristan's world this kind of abuse to the body would have killed him. In her world her chakra allowed her body to take it, but not without painful repercussions.

By the time she reached the fire user- standing as he was in an elevated chunk of rocks in the centre of the group- she couldn't feel much of her skin and her lungs were burning painfully. She wouldn't be able to fight much after this. She would have to trust her team would be able to handle the rest.

Perched just below the rock he was standing on, she went through a series of hand signs and gathered chakra in her chest, just in case. She didn't breathe as she climbed. Her temperature lowered the closer she got.

Just as she made it onto the top of the platform the man twisted suddenly and sent a wave of fire at her. She released her own spew of water from her mouth and darted forward, swearing and stopping her transparency jutsu to instead slap a palm on the mans head and channel a short burst of lightning through it.

He must have been using his chakra to sense his immediate surroundings.

He collapsed and she panted, dropping to one knee as a head rush hit her.

Sakura did not have much chakra left. Producing that much fucking

water was enough to wipe out two thirds of her tiny reserves in a single move. She cycled it to heat her body and focused on breathing. By the sounds of the battle and the mokuton that had sprouted to hold down the man before her, her team had taken the upper hand, so she didn't feel her reemergence on the battle field was an immediate necessity, at the very least.

Some feeling was just returning to her limbs when she heard the clattering of a stone behind her. She whipped around and channeled her storm release over a fist, slamming it towards the arm reaching towards her.

But it was slower than it should have been. The movement clumsy with the numbness in her limbs and the pain in her body.

The shinobi dodged, grabbed her wrist and his chakra began to cover her own.

Her eyes widened and she tried to rip his hold away as she leapt to smash a hand into his chest but a chunk of metal was already hitting her temple and her chakra- the little that was left minuscule in comparison to the man's own reserves- was being held down as they shunshined.

Her world went black.

-

Sakura woke up bound with ninja wire and with itchiness of dried ink on her forehead. Any attempts to move more than the wire allowed would threaten to end in slices down to her bone and any attempts to reach her chakra found nothing but a foggy feeling. A chakra suppressing seal then. Impressive for a gang lackey to produce in the field, but not unthinkable.

Her training meant she'd made no indication she was awake and she focused on her hearing. There was the crackling of fire, the soft sounds of breathing- relaxed but not sleeping- and beyond that only the natural sounds of the forest.

Her clothes were in place and there weren't any strange substances on her body so it looked like she hadn't been raped, which was nice, but also meant she wasn't entirely sure why she was still alive. If she'd been used as a hostage to make an escape, she would have been killed and dumped the moment her kidnapper had made it out of range of her team. If she'd been connected with her persona as the Null-Storm

and they were looking for her bounty they would have simply taken her head and been done with it.

She would have to investigate. Sakura opened her eyes. A man was sitting next to a fire before her, holding a fish on a stick in the flames.

“You know, it’s generally considered unseemly to kidnap little girls.” She said and he turned to look at her, a shock of blue hair and a greedy look in brown eyes.

“Up until a few hours ago I was working for an organisation that made most of its money selling little girls like you.” He replied, looking over the binds on her and turning back to his fish once he was satisfied.

“Aah, good point, good point.” Sakura said, nodding sagely. “But there’s a big difference between delivering little girls to creeps for money and lugging one of your own through the woods.” He looked back over at her and she battered her eyelashes. “Are you going to have you way with me? Feel like a big man fucking the pink haired girl in the dirt?”

He laughed, a booming, throaty noise. “You think that’s why I took you?” He asked. Sakura heard the faint trace of footsteps at the edge of her hearing range.

“It’s the only reasonable explanation I could come up with, yes.” She said.

“That was really the only one?” His voice was incredulous.

“The only option that would leave me alive, at least.” She shrugged the few centimetres that the wire allowed her.

“Fuck, Konoha’s intelligence must be really dogshit these days.” He grumbled, the complaint strangely with a lot of emotion behind it for someone who was a missing-nin. One hand was shuffling through the pack beside him and he pulled out a ball of paper, pressing it smooth against his knee and holding it up for inspection.

She felt a frown build on her face. It was a drawing of her in her jōnin uniform, height and weight listed underneath. It did not include her storm chakra or kenjutsu use. It didn’t even include her signature facial scars.

‘The Boiler. WANTED by Akatsuki: 50 million ryos ALIVE and UNHARMED’

Nothing that could be considered related to the Null-Storm. Perhaps Sakura should be relieved that Orochimaru hadn't tipped the world and Akatsuki off about that little tidbit but instead it just felt like a threat. A snippet of blackmail to hang over her head.

"It was a real stroke of luck when you appeared." The guy said, smile full of teeth as he crumpled to paper back up and shoved it into his pack. "Been wanting to get out of that dogshit gang for years."

"And why does Akastuki want me?" She asked, putting as much incredulousness into her tone as possible.

"Not certain, but last time one of these was put out the guy in the picture ended up being recruited." He looked her over with a dismissive expression on his face. "Dunno why they'd bother with you though."

The footsteps were coming closer. A trio of them. Sakura kept the guy talking.

"I did kill two of them." She smiled sweetly. "Maybe they need replacements." Her voice was a croon.

He laughed, high pitched and cackling. "I like you, girly, maybe I'll take my time getting to the drop off point."

"And that would be?" She asked. He just smiled toothily in response. "You're not worried about my team coming to get me?"

"Nah, I'm pretty good at throwing off trails and you didn't have nothing on you." He replied dismissively, going back to the fish on the stick. She didn't mention the seed in her stomach.

There were sounds coming from all around them now, soft and unheard by the man as Sakura worked on keeping his attention.

"I would really rather not join those assholes, you know?" She said making her voice a little louder with desperation. "I've never suited black. It just washes out my skin tone, but I suppose someone with a fashion sense like that just wouldn't understand."

A slither of offence wormed onto his face.

"I mean *really*? Blue and red? You look like a fucking clown." She cackled and an annoyed expression crossed his face. "Ugly peice of shit."

He looked at her and snarled. "Oi! I might not be touching yah but that's not because I wo-" wood burst through the ground under him, pinning him in place and wrapping around his neck tightly. Cutting off his airflow.

"Don't kill him!" Sakura called. "He has information on Akatsuki."

"Understood." Tiger muttered, walking towards the bound man and undoing the pressure once he fell unconscious. She noted the ring of rapidly purpling bruises around his neck with a surge of satisfaction. Uzumaki ran to her side and started cutting through the wire binding her. New Kid hovered over them worriedly, his eyes pinched just a fraction.

"Are you alright, Sakura?" The Uzumaki asked, his voice was angry. "We tried to get the bastard but he disappeared whilst we were distracted dealing with the other's. We didn't even realise you'd been taken until the battle was over and you were nowhere to be found."

"I'm perfectly fine, thank you Naruto." She replied, stretching the stiff muscles from being held in one position for so long. "Thank you, all of you for saving me."

"What was he after?" Tiger asked, the wood-bound, unconscious man over one shoulder and his pack in a hand. "We only heard the back end of the conversation." He was eyeing the dried ink on her forehead.

"Apparently Akatsuki is running a recruitment drive." As she spoke Tiger's eyebrows rose into his forehead. She pointed to the pack and he held it out for her. She opened it to pull out the paper and handed it to the Uzumaki.

"Those bastards!" He hissed, oozing a low level of the Kyuubi's chakra.

Tiger and New Kid read over the paper. "That is troubling, indeed." New Kid said, Tiger had a complicated expression on his face.

"There's some kind of drop off point he wouldn't tell me about." Sakura pointed at the captured man. "But T&I should be able to get it out of him."

"You're going to need to be carried back, I don't have the expertise to be confident removing that seal." Tiger said, nodding to her forehead.

“I’ll do it.” Uzumaki offered, shifting to pick her up with a light flush on his face. Sakura valiantly withheld a grimace.

“Actually it would be better if I flew us there.” New Kid offered, already painting what looked like birds onto a scroll, and the Uzumaki paused.

“You can do that?” He asked excitedly and New Kid nodded.

“It is highly conspicuous and uses a moderate amount of chakra, but it would be much simpler and faster than walking with multiple burdens.” His tone was flat, Tiger nodded.

“Sounds like a plan. I don’t want to leave that seal on for any longer than absolutely necessary.”

Five giant birds formed from the scroll as New Kid performed a hand sign.

Sakura’s smile was gleeful as she climbed onto one and her laugh was delighted as it took off. “This is brilliant, Hedgehog!”

The other two echoed her sentiments and the very tips of New Kid’s ears went pink.

She’d expected the Uzumaki to be more combative about the decision, but apparently he and the New Kid had had a heart to heart that involved New Kid finishing his porn stash and now they were besties. Despite having been a teenage boy, once upon a time, Sakura really didn’t understand teenage boys.

Chapter End Notes

For some reason AO3 decided I needed a bunch of blank draft chapters between my last two, which is why the chapter numbers were screwy, but that should be fixed now.

I blame Mohjang.

Hokage Approved Treason

Chapter Summary

Sakura discovers just how weird her chakra awareness is, works to overcome the fact that she has the reserves the average eight year old and in the process restricts herself to the reserves of an average four year old.

Ah well, at least she's efficient.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hatake's ink-covered finger painted a series of lines over her forehead as he leaned over from the hospital bed. A palm laid flat against it and he pulsed a chunk of chakra into the seal, ignoring Tiger's protests from the other side of the room. Uzumaki and the New Kid had gone their respective ways after reassurances that Tiger would get Sakura's seal removed.

Sakura felt the blessed feeling of her chakra awareness returning and she sighed, collapsing back into the chair. She circulated it faster and faster, feeling her body warm pleasantly. Hatake went back to his porn.

"Oh thank god." She said. "I was going to go completely insane if that went on for much longer."

"You must be very aware of your own chakra." Tiger said and she tilted her head.

"What do you mean?"

"Most people wearing a seal like that wouldn't notice anything wrong until they tried to perform a jutsu." He explained, her brow furrowed.

"Really? But my chakra went all foggy and horrible, how could you not notice that?"

"...What does your chakra feel like, to you?"

"...Like my chakra? Threads of constantly moving energy throughout my body?"

“And you’re aware of that movement.”

“Yep.” She nodded. “Ever since I was a baby, I liked to play with changing the circulation as a toddler, really freaked mum and dad out, you know?” She chuckled, Tiger looked vaguely disturbed. Even Hatake had looked up from his porn to slowly blink at her. She looked between them. “It is really that abnormal?”

“I’ve never heard of anything like it.” Tiger shook his head. “Up until now I wasn’t aware of anyone that didn’t have to really concentrate to get even a vague idea of their chakra flow.”

“I can’t even imagine that being possible.” Sakura admitted. “I mean you two have massive reserves, I always imagined it must feel like having a bonfire under your skin.”

“Maa, Sakura-chan.” Drawled Hatake. “Are you aware of the movement of blood through your veins?”

She frowned. “That makes sense.” Her brows furrowed. Was it because of her memories of Tristan? Her brain recognised her chakra as separate from herself and as such was constantly aware of it? She hummed thoughtfully and stood, heading for the door. “Thanks for fixing me, Kashi, and thanks for coming to get me from the creep, taicho.” She opened the door and peeked backwards. “I would stay, but I don’t want to get between your super secret love affair and I have to go bother the Hokage.”

She closed the door to the confused exclamations of Tiger and a loud, resigned sigh from Hatake.

(When she came to visit again later that afternoon, she brought an overfilled bag full of cookies and a pug-sized racoon plushie)

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“It has come to my attention that I have terrible chakra reserves.” Sakura said, the Hokage glaring at her over the desk as if the woman wasn’t incredibly grateful for something to divert her attention from the mountains of paperwork she was surrounded by.

“This is well known.” The Hokage replied, brows furrowing. “There was quite a lot of fuss about it when I made you jōnin, but those in the know about your mission record agreed it didn’t matter.”

“Why did you make me jōnin?”

“You deserved it.” The Hokage said, Sakura raised an eyebrow. “And I was getting annoyed with everyone thinking you were some unbloodied genin.” The woman admitted. Sakura snorted and quirked a corner of her mouth.

“People still think I’m some unbloodied genin.”

“Because you’re a manipulative little shit.” The woman growled and Sakura nodded her agreement cheerfully. “Why are you here?”

“Aah, well I came to the realisation that my reserves are pathetic and that I desperately need to change that.” Sakura explained, her face turning serious. “I’ve been lucky so far, but they will get me killed one day.”

“That is a very likely possibility.” The Hokage nodded, a troubled expression on her face. “And what exactly do you want to do about it?”

“Well, I realised the solution is quite literally staring me in the face.” Sakura said, the Hokage still looked confused so Sakura tapped a finger to her forehead, causing the woman’s eyes to widen before they narrowed in consideration.

“I only offer to teach that to medic-nins.” The Senju argued, though it was more thoughtful than anything.

“They have not been successful.” Sakura replied. “You’ve already taught me your fighting style.”

“True, but that was a favour for a favour, even if you manipulated me into it.” The Senju was grinning. Sakura’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

“And you want a favour in return.” She said flatly. The Hokage made a hand sign and her guards disappeared, a swipe of a bloodied finger under her desk and the windows and doors slammed closed and lit up with a solid purple barrier.

“An S-rank mission, completely off the books, entirely unmentioned except behind these seals and with only the two of us.” The Hokage leaned forward, opening a drawer and withdrawing a vial of blood as she did. “I want you to break into ROOT and make a copy of as many files as you can get your hands on. This is Shimura Danzō’s blood, I trust you will be able to gain access with this.”

Sakura took the vial and looked at it with wide eyes. “Why?” She

asked.

"I know you were the one to leave me those binders. They all lead back to Danzō." The Senju said. "I've been keeping your abilities a secret from everyone but those who it was absolutely necessary to know for this very reason. But obviously since this mission is not to be written down or spoken of-"

"You cannot hold me accountable for refusing." Sakura finished. She looked up from the vial. "Alright. A favour for a favour."

"If you are discovered," The Hokage began, face deadly serious. "I will mark you as a traitor and you will be forced to become a missing-nin. I cannot risk Danzō becoming aware of my knowledge of him and acting against me in a more aggressive manner. If such an eventuality should occur, I want you to cripple his forces as much as possible, desert the village and assassinate the man. I will pardon your actions after his death."

"One other thing." The woman said, holding up a hand. "That seal requires a constant, steady flow of chakra. If you decide to form it, you will only have thirty percent of your reserves until it's finished. With your reserves?" Her brows furrowed as she considered it. "Maybe around five years?"

"That's fine." Sakura said, not a moment of hesitation.

"Are you sure you don't want to think over your answer?" The woman said and green eyes looked back at her seriously.

"There's no use in hesitating." Sakura said. "If I put it off because of the current danger, what's to say the next danger won't be even greater? Will I keep putting it off until I'm killed or forced to retire? I'll just have to get used to it. Of course, with this favour and the seal you will have to give me some easier missions."

"I've given Tenzō leave from his position as captain of Team Ro. He will act as an extra member when required, but wishes to focus on his placement as a member of Team Kakashi instead." The Hokage said and Sakura nodded warily. "You will be replacing him as captain. I will also be putting you on my guard rotation."

Her eyes widened. "On thirty percent reserves? You'll kill me." She hissed.

"You can always hold off on forming the seal." The Hokage said, tone

overly nonchalant. Sakura's eyes narrowed poisonously.

"Fine. It's about time I was made captain anyway." She said.

"I'll admit, I would have promoted you late last year if I hadn't been aware of Naruto's impending return." The Hokage said as she stood, making her way to the small, personal bookcase filled to the brim with informational books and scrolls. Sakura slipped the vial of blood into her weapons pouch.

The woman dumped two handwritten notebooks into Sakura's hands before returning to her desk and running her thumb under the wood. The barrier deactivated and the guards returned to their positions.

"I don't want you to bother me again until you've read through those and passed the first three stages." The Hokage said, waving a hand at Sakura and returning to her paperwork. "Even with your ridiculous chakra control it should take at least a week."

"Understood, Hokage-sama." Sakura bowed and left, books clutched in her arms and hyper aware of the blood vial in her pouch.

It would be fine. She had the backing of the Hokage. She was a jōnin. An ANBU captain. Sakura couldn't just be disappeared without anyone being the wiser anymore.

-

Sakura pulled the two boys along with her, buzzing with excitement and her arms looped through theirs.

"Where are we even going?" The Uzumaki whined, yawning widely. Apparently for the blonde a day without a mission or team meeting meant a day to sleep. Sakura suddenly hadn't found it so surprising he was, frankly, substandard for someone who had trained for two years with a Sannin. Sakura herself had spent the morning training and fully intended to spend the afternoon studying before she went to more training. This was her only break for the day.

"My friend opened a shop!" Sakura said cheerfully, pulling them down another turn and towards the market district.

"A friend? Do I know them? Are they a shinobi?" He asked.

"Yes. No. And they were, they retired!" She said. "To open a shop!"

“A former teammate?” New Kid asked and Sakura nodded.

“Someone I don’t know was in Team Kakashi?” Uzumaki asked, incredulous. She snorted.

“During the years you were away I was in many other teams.” She said and furrowed her brows at him. “I actually have a very extensive mission record... you do know that, right?”

“Eh?” He scratched his head. “I don’t know I kinda thought you were just... training?”

“I made jōnin. You make that through having many shinobi recommend you for the position and an extensive mission record.”

“I... what kind of missions did you eve-”

“We’re here!” Sakura said with a smile and pulled them to a stop outside the small store. A small sign decorated with the name and a cartoon panda drinking from a rainbow cup hung out the front.

“Kita smoothies?” Uzumaki said. “What’s a smoothie?”

Sakura smiled. “Something *magical*.” She had been the one to introduce Panda to the concept when he’d expressed his wish to open a shop, after all. Before she’d come along this world had had some fruit flavoured teas and milk drinks but no concept of smoothies. It was one of the few things she’d truly missed from her time as Tristan.

Of course, she could make them herself, but there was something infinitely more satisfying about spending far too much money on a convenient, deliciously filled plastic cup.

She pulled the pair inside, ducking through the flap-covered entrance, and noted the two dozen or so people inside the store. Far more than could comfortably fit. Still, the man was an ex-ANBU. Even run ragged and directing two helpers whilst taking a series of orders, he immediately noticed their entrance.

“Pinky! You made it!” Panda called and she grinned.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Itsuki.” She said and the man gestured for one of his helpers to take over ordering and wandering to lean over the bar at the three of them.

“Who’re the hang ons?”

“Hey! I’m not a hang on, I’m her friend! Uzumaki Naruto!” The blonde became loud and distracting, slamming a hand on the bar in offence. Panda’s grin widened.

“I like your attitude kid. Kita Itsuki!” He held out a hand and Uzumaki shook it, grinning in return. “Look after Pinky for me, her self preservation instincts can be a bit shaky.”

“You can count on me!” Uzumaki said and the man laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. He turned to New Kid, his face almost imperceptibly becoming a little guarded. Sakura headed that off before it could begin, and leaned across the bar and faux-whispered.

“I know he looks a little shady, but he’s a total sweetheart.”

“Well you would know.” He nodded and his face opened again. “Kita Itsuki, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” He held out a hand. New Kid took it.

“My name is Sai.” New Kid answered. “But my nickname is Hedgehog. It’s a pleasure to meet you... um...” Sakura felt a wonderful sense of foreboding. Her smile widened. “Obnoxious Fruity.”

Both her and Panda started cracking up simultaneously.

“It’s a bit of a mouthful, but fitting.” Panda said before turning to her. “What’ll it be?”

“Mango Madness for the blonde, Berry Bonanza for me and Dragonfruit Dance Party for Sai.” She handed over a wad of cash, the man hesitated to take it but she just held it in his face. “Trust me, start giving me free drinks and I’ll bleed you dry in a month.”

“Coming right up.” He took the cash and turned to begin their drinks, commandeering the blender section from one of the helpers.

“Mango Madness?” Naruto asked as he squinted upwards at the hanging menus.

“You’ll love it. Sunshine drink for the sunshine boy.”

(He did, in fact, love it. New Kid drank his with an upwards twitch of his lips.)

-

It was... disturbingly easy to break into the archives of ROOT. Sakura

had just had to spend an afternoon following the old creep and, once he lead her right to the secret compound, look for the most heavily sealed door she could find.

A swipe of stasis protected blood, a burst of fake Shimura chakra and it was open.

It went to show how heavily this world relied on sealing as the pinnacle of defence, when a bit of research put into physical locking systems would probably work just as well, if not better.

She had been worried that ROOT would have a sensor that could pick her up, but at her level of ability with chakra suppression it would likely take an extremely talented born-in sensor to tell she was there and they hadn't been seen since the Uzumaki were basically wiped out. Sakura wouldn't have been surprised if the old man had hoarded one, but she also wasn't surprised that he hadn't.

Of course, they could just be on a mission, but at the very least it was a good sign she hadn't yet been discovered.

Sakura spent the following night methodically transcribing the files in the room onto sheets of paper, carefully sealing them in a complicated library storage scroll.

When light started to peek through the single window, she mentally marked the place she was up to, packed up her scroll, and disappeared.

-

Hatake stared down at her with a strange intensity. Sakura pulled the smoothie straw out of her mouth.

"Um, hi, sensei?" She greeted with a great deal of bewilderment. She deftly ignored the non-chakra-created heat creeping over her cheeks. "I'm glad to see you out of the hospital... Should you be out of the hospital?"

"Training." He said mysteriously, a foreboding note to his tone.

"You were training?"

"No. Training. For you." His eye narrowed dramatically. "I've organised you a teacher."

“And who would that be?”

“MY ETERNAL RIVAL!!” Came a call from behind them, a green blur racing down the street towards them.

“No.” Sakura whispered. Kakashi nodded solemnly. Then disappeared in a swirl of leaves.

“AH, WHAT A COOL AND HIP ATTITUDE!” Maito yelled, skidding to a stop before her. “BUT TODAY I MUST LET HIM GO FOR I AM HERE FOR YOU, THE YOUTHFUL SAKURA!” Maito was not good at volume control.

“Hello, Gai-sensei.”

“WE WILL BE TRAINING TOGETHER EVERY DAY WE ARE BOTH IN THE VILLAGE.” He started doing squats as he talked. Sakura, deciding just to go with it, joined in and hurriedly started finishing her smoothie. “I WAKE UP AT FOUR EACH MORNING TO RUN FIVE HUNDRED LAPS AROUND THE VILLAGE.”

“Sounds great.” She said and threw the empty cup over her head, the plastic landing perfectly in a nearby garbage can.

“THEN I YOUTHFULLY DO A FULL BODY WORKOUT!” He moved on to pushups, Sakura followed. “IN THE AFTERNOONS I DO TAIJUTSU PRACTICE AND THEN ANOTHER SIX HUNDRED LAPS AROUND THE VILLAGE. USUALLY I AM JOINED BY LEE.”

“I can’t wait.”

“YOSH! YOU WILL WEAR THESE. ALWAYS.” He handed her two sets of weights to strap around her calves, when she grabbed them she immediately followed them to the floor with an ‘oof’, lifting them and strapping them to her legs with a great amount of effort. She tested a step. It was like moving through a mountain.

She was going to die. Again.

“OFF WE GO! THE POWER OF YOUTH AWAITS FOR NO MAN!” He disappeared in a blur of green. Sakura stared for a moment before chasing after him.

Her legs were already hurting.

Sakura took five days to pass the first three stages of forming the Strength of a Hundred Seal.

The first step was meditation. The seal was formed at a natural intersection of yin and yang chakra in the body. Not a tenketsu point, but an area where the two forms rubbed against each other and became parallel cycles. Most shinobi had four or five of these areas, with the strongest usually being on the forehead or between the collarbones. Sakura was not an exception to this.

Her strongest was on her forehead, with a secondary point between her collarbones, a third at the base of her stomach and a fourth- oddly enough- off centre on her right forearm.

The second step was to create an exact combination of yin and yang chakra to produce a purple glow at the chosen point- since this was her first she was using her forehead, with was her strongest possible point- using seventy two percent yin to twenty eight percent yang. This took Sakura an afternoon to perfect.

The third step was the hardest. It was producing that glow whilst she was using ninjutsu. She'd trained her chakra her whole life to suppress itself, to become as small and unnoticeable as possible. To suddenly put a giant, glowing sign on herself as she used chakra went against her very nature. It was incredibly frustrating to try and achieve, but she did it. With stubbornness and willpower she did it.

Now, she was standing in the Hokage's office, showing this new skill off to an exasperated Hokage.

"I know I said a week but I was joking." The woman said after Sakura had shown off the new skill. "This is ridiculous. It took me three months to manage what you did in five days."

Sakura shrugged. "I have perfect-"

"Chakra control, yeah I think I'm actually starting to get that." The woman said. She stood, pulling a scroll from a drawer in her desk and walking around it. "Right, I'll get you to kneel for this bit." She said, Sakura knelt. "I need you to project your chakra through that point the entire time. If you stop before I tell you to, the entire process will fail and that point will forever be blocked from your ability to use."

Sakura nodded seriously and channelled her chakra. The Hokage took out a kunai and pierced the skin, causing a line of blood to drip down Sakura's face. The woman dipped a tiny brush in the blood, spread the

scroll out in front of her, and drew a series of sealing runes in the centre circle, the red standing out against the black runes it was surrounded by.

The scroll lit up and the black and red swirled, lifting off the paper in a stream and rushing into her forehead in a lance of niggling pain. Sakura's eyes watered and her hands clenched but she forced herself to keep channelling, essentially keeping her wound forced open for the foreign invasion. It wasn't even close to the most painful thing she'd ever experienced, but it was very, very, *very* uncomfortable. Like ants crawling under her skin.

She kept going.

After an eternity and no time at all it stopped. Sakura opened her eyes, still channeling, not remembering when she had closed them.

"You can stop now." The Senju said, rolling up the scroll and tossing the brush. Sakura stopped, but the pull continued.

"Hm, it's still draining." She murmured and the Senju glanced at her, surprised.

"You can feel that?" She asked. Sakura nodded.

"I only recently found out that being constantly aware of the exact position, flow, and state of your chakra is abnormal."

"That explains your talent for control." The Hokage chuckled and sat in chair behind the desk. "It will drain continuously until your reserves reach thirty percent, after which it will continue draining what you create above thirty percent, so essentially your new reserves are capped there. The seal also works as a shield against sensors, preventing them from just seeing a giant, glowing dot on your forehead. All your stealth tricks will still work fine. Now you just leave it to do it's work, it'll be a long five years but you'll figure it out."

"Thank you, shishou-oba-san." Sakura said with a bow. The woman waved her out.

"Yeah, yeah, get out of my office brat."

Sakura headed to the small bathroom on the floor, washing off the face and staring at her reflection in the mirror. For now, the seal was just a thin purple 'V' on her forehead, but it would eventually fill out

to a small rhombus. She thought it would suit her, offset her forehead's slightly oversized nature.

-

"Right." Sakura started, standing before the blackboard and staring at the group of three ANBU.

(Panda had been replaced with Otter, a quiet earth user from her very first ANBU mission.)

"As you all know, Tiger has stepped down from his position as captain." She said. "I have hence been made captain of Team Ro. As this will be my first mission in a leadership role, I expect there to be some growing pains, but I trust and respect all of you to help me out when it is needed. I will not pretend to be a kind person, nor a kind captain. I do not see you all as beloved children. What I do see you as is mine. Mine to order. Mine to deal with. Mine to use as I see fit."

She leaned forward, putting both hands on the table and looking over them.

"I do not like people touching what is mine." She hissed. "If you get into trouble, I promise I will tear apart the bastards that touched you and then I will *ensure* you never let it happen again. Are we clear?"

"Yes, taicho!" The three said in unison. Their voices serious under the distortion.

"Good. Now as my teammates you should be aware that I only have access to thirty percent of my chakra stores." There was some incredulous shifting. "I'm not telling you this to worry you, if you are worried I'm happy to take you to a training ground and beat your asses, I'm simply letting you know why I won't be using a lot of my jutsu arsenal.

"The mission is a simple one, we'll be hitting a caravan heading into the Land of Sound. We have intel the enemy shinobi..."

-

Sakura was on Monkey's back, pressed as close to the man as possible, and mimicking his signature as they approached the convoy of wagons filled with supplies. They'd gotten intelligence a sensor of unknown capability would be on the guard. The advantage of them underestimating their numbers would be tremendous.

She shifted her position as he flew through the trees and her bare shoulder touched his.

They both sucked in a breath and she ripped her shoulder away. The man didn't need to be told not to make any noise and focus on the mission but she could practically hear him shelving the questions for later. Having your chakra forcefully pulled from your body was far more noticeable than the internal drain of the seal.

Her mind whirled. She had definitely begun sucking in his chakra. The only explanation was the seal.

Was it automatically registering other people's chakra as hers if she mimicked their signature? Could she effectively use other people as batteries to charge the thing?

Things to explore back in Konoha.

For now, she gave a quiet birdcall and leapt off Monkey's back, ducking into the fight with her zero-chakra elemental transformation speeding her movements but without the draining chakra pumped into her sword.

She ducked and weaved almost entirely under her own power. Kusanagi slicing through the enemies as she went. It was truly a beautiful sword, slicing through muscle and bone alike as if it were butter.

Sakura was barely panting by the end of it, but her thighs were screaming. She blamed Maito.

-

"You can use other people to power the seal?" The Hokage said, baffled. Sakura nodded, an excited smile behind her blood splattered mask. She'd been a little enthusiastic about testing and sharing the new revelation.

"Can I show you?" Sakura asked, already shifting her chakra to mimic the Hokage's.

"Sure." The woman replied. Sakura ran to the edge of the desk, twisting sideways and leaning her shoulder towards the woman.

"Touch my skin."

The Hokage did. "Oh. That is fascinating." She said. "Will it drain me to thirty percent?" She took her hand off and shook her head. "Too risky that it'll mess with my own seal. Naruto's too high risk." She was muttering under her breath, Sakura returned to her position in the middle of the room and waited. "Fox!" The woman barked and an ANBU appeared next to Sakura. "Get Kakashi."

It took thirty minutes for the man to appear, apparently choosing to answer a Hokage summons fairly promptly. The Hokage spent that time pouring over her notes and muttering. Sakura, only being knowledgeable in a few specific niches of sealing work- particularly locking seals and home security- from limited research, left her to it to instead stare out the window and mentally run over future training for Team Ro.

"Hokage-sama." Hatake said as he entered, sending a curious and more than a little worried glance at her. "Sparrow." He nodded

"Kakashi." She replied with her own nod.

"Right, touch her." The Hokage said, glancing up from her notebook to point between the two. "Skin-to-skin contact."

Sakura mimicked Hatake's signature as the tips of his fingers touched her shoulder. He sucked in a gentle breath and the hand pressed over her shoulder completely. She let out a quiet "oh". The Hokage's eyes narrowed.

"What is it?" She asked and Sakura tilted her head.

"It's... warmer?" She said. "You and Monkey both automatically started draining, but it itched uncomfortably. Your chakras were both distinctly other in my system. His actually feels quite nice." Sakura was fully aware there was a flush building on her cheeks but she did nothing to stop it. One of the benefits of the mask. Both Sakura and the Hokage turned to look at Kakashi.

He had one hand in a pocket but the other had still noticeably not moved from his grip, if anything it had tightened a little throughout explanation.

"Maa, the same I guess." He paused and looked to the sky. "This won't kill me, will it?"

"It shouldn't." The Hokage said. "It should automatically stop when your reserves reach thirty percent." The man nodded, seemingly

content to stay like that until then.

“Maybe it’s because we both have lightning affinities?” Sakura suggested. The Hokage shook her head.

“I have a lightning affinity.” She said. “Maybe it’s a matter of continuous, close proximity?”

“If it was just that I would have reacted better to Monkey.”

“Possibly because of the time spent around each other during your younger years, when your chakra was still growing? Any family we could test?”

“No. The closest would be Genma, I’ve been friends with him since after my first C-rank.”

“Hm, we’ll test it after we figure out if it will stop. How are your chakra levels Kakashi?”

“Aah, about halfway.” He said, a tired note to his voice. His eye was suspiciously lidded.

“You’re not falling asleep, are you?” Sakura asked, a little incredulous. Had she ever seen the man sleepy if it wasn’t directly after waking up from chakra exhaustion?

“It’s a bit like being in an incredibly relaxing, hot bath but without the wetness.” He explained, somewhat helpfully. “It’s proving strangely difficult to stay awake.”

“And you’re not tired at all?” The Hokage asked, Sakura shook her head.

“No, I feel really energised. Though that might change once ten times the amount of chakra I’ve ever had stops flowing through me.” Her tone had an edge of mirth and the Hokage nodded.

There was a few more minutes during which Kakashi actually stifled a yawn- definitely a first- before the warm rushing feeling turned into more of a slow trickle of contentment. “Hmm, thirty percent?” She asked him, he nodded.

“Around there.”

“Alright, you’re free to go.” The Hokage said and Kakashi nodded, hand lingering a little before it dropped and he begun to walk out the

door. Sakura swayed alarmingly as the connection was cut off. He caught her by the elbow.

“You alright?” Hatake asked, hand carefully avoiding her skin as he helped her straighten. She nodded.

“Yep, just suddenly exhausted.” She said, taking a deep breath and drawing herself up. “I’m good.” He hummed.

“I’ll leave you two to it, then.” And headed for the door with a wave.

“See ya-” Sakura was cut off by a yawn.

“Rabbit.” The Hokage called and a masked Shiranui dropped down from the rafters, reaching to press his gloveless fingers to her shoulder without needing to be asked. Sakura mimicked his signature.

They both jolted their skin away immediately. Sakura fell to her knees, scrambled to push up her mask and threw up. Shiranui stumbled away and leaned heavily against the wall, panting.

“Oh fuck that, Pinky, I am never touching you again.” He groaned. The Hokage was running a glowing green hand over him and frowning.

“You’re such an asshole even my chakra hates you.” She giggled, pushing away from the pool of vomit to sit heavily on the floor. The Hokage came over to run a hand over her, frowning further.

“Well medically there’s nothing wrong with either of you.” She announced, sounding very put out about the whole thing. Sakura was reminded distinctly of her experience after her summons debacle. She hastily pushed herself to standing, feeling the intense and sudden urge to retreat.

“I’m going home and I’m going to sleep. No more tests.” Sakura said, heading for the window.

“Oi, brat! I’m the Hokage you can’t just leave!” The Hokage scowled.

“We’ve done this before, you can’t keep perfectly healthy people prisoners!” Sakura retorted.

“I’m the Hokage! I can do what I want.”

“Good night, shishou-oba-san.” Sakura said, perched on the windowsill, and took off into the night.

Sakura showered and brushed her teeth three times before she collapsed into bed, out before her head had hit the pillow.

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to thank you all so much for the continued support of this work, it's fucking insane that you all haven't simply lost interest and stopped reading yet. So, yeah, thank you!!!

And- because I've gotten a couple of comments mentioning it- I want to throw you all a bone and say that there's two more chapters after this until Pein, at which point the KakaSaku aspect of this fic starts ramping up. Turns out dying puts some things into perspective and, whilst the pair don't officially become a thing until nearing the end, the UST dials up to eleven.

Well. Maybe not completely unresolved... ;)

Ignoring an Immortal Tentacle Monster

Chapter Summary

Everything goes great.

Until it doesn't.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sakura spent the next few months getting chakra 'donations' whenever possible. They all came in various levels of discomfort- so far Hatake's was the only person who was pleasant- some more violently- New Kid felt like being stabbed with thousands of tiny needles- whilst others were more just mild crawling sensations. The majority of donations were small, just ten percent or so of their chakra, but occasionally people gave the full seventy.

Somehow, every night they were both in the village, Hatake found her and drained his completely. Whether she was eating out, walking home, or straight up already in bed he would show up, drain himself down and then disappear. She suspected he was using her as a method of combatting insomnia, but she didn't mind. It felt nice and she hadn't had any strange, duck-based nightmares since it had started.

Her copying of the ROOT files continued and soon she had the entire room transcribed and sealed away. She quietly slipped the scroll onto the Hokage's desk and searched for another room to copy down. She found one fairly quickly, this one with lower security that she suspected was used more frequently, and began. She concentrated on simply transcribing the information accurately and not the frustrating patterns of warmongering, pointless sacrifice where there were easier ways to achieve things and targeting far too high risk targets for low rewards.

That wasn't her job.

Her training with Maito continued and she learnt to fight with her muscles barely able to move from their ache and train with her body ready to collapse beneath her. She grew stronger. Everything went great.

Until it didn't.

She tapped on the glass, the bird that had led her here having already disappeared in a mouthful of caterpillars and a puff of smoke.

She didn't notice it had opened until her finger didn't hit the window pane. She blinked and looked upwards. Kakashi was staring at her. She looked out towards the village, breathed for a moment and spoke.

"Monkey's dead." It was quiet, toneless. Almost swept away entirely on the wind. A hand grasped her elbow and pulled her into the apartment beyond. Her body followed the pull unthinkingly. Her head empty.

"Shower." He said, pushing her into the bathroom, dumping a pile of clothes and a towel on the sink and closing the door behind him. She stripped, distantly aware the clothes and weapons she touched were slimy with a mixture of mud and humans entrails, and climbed into the shower. Not minding that it was freezing cold and slowly heated up until it was scalding. The water ran red. She scrubbed with the scentless body soap until it didn't anymore.

She halfheartedly dried herself with the overly fluffy towel and dressed in the clothing left for her. It took some effort- the long sleeved black shirt was more of a short dress and the pant legs had to be rolled four times and the drawstring pulled as tight as it could go and then wrapped around her waist again to get them to stay up- but she managed it and exited the bathroom with the towel in her hands.

Kakashi was leaning against the wall to the left of the door when she opened it. He pushed her head down until she was staring at their feet and buried an unmasked nose into the top of her head. Her hearing focused on the familiar pattern of breathing and steady heartbeat and she slowly relaxed as they stood.

A few breaths turning into a minute.

He pulled her head back up, his mask already back in place, and dumped the towel on her head, ruffling it to try and dry her hair properly. She added her hands to the bottom, getting the ends, and by the time they were done her hair was a ridiculous, curly mess down her back but it was no longer soaking wet.

A hand on her shoulder pushed her towards the bed, directing her down to lay with her head on a pillow and leaving it to pull a blanket over her. He pulled a chair from another room and set it next to the bed, grabbing her hand in his own and sitting. His hand was warm and rough with callouses, gloveless as it engulfed her own. There was

a scar over his second knuckle that she'd never noticed before. His skin just a few shades darker than her own but his undertones more neutral than hers. It made the contrast between them more stark. Like his entire being was created from shades of grey whilst even her skin was dipped in pink.

He didn't speak. The silence wasn't oppressive or judgmental but it wasn't entirely comfortable either. He wasn't forcing her to talk, but he also wasn't not pushing her to.

"He was mine." She whispered eventually, keeping her eyes on their hands. Not wanting to confirm the swirl of red in the corner of her vision. "He was one of mine and all I could do was pull the sword from his chest and cut out the bastard's heart with it." Her hand tightened to a grip that was likely painful but Kakashi didn't complain, just tightening his own in response.

Hot tracks trailed down her face and tears darkened the pillow and she sobbed. Sakura was struck with the sudden realisation that she was *mourning*.

She hadn't done that in this life. Tristan'd barely done that in her last life.

Her signature shifted to mimic Kakashi's and she cried through the influx of warmth. The hand holding her's tightened further and another landed on top of her head. The painful hole in her chest felt just a little bit less overwhelming in response.

She was asleep before the warmth slowed.

-

Sakura woke to an empty chair with a cold bowl of miso, eggplant and rice sitting on top. Further investigation showed that the apartment was empty. She warmed the bowl of food, ate and cleaned the bathroom before she left out the window. Her hair and skin darkened and changed, the mask slipped back over her face as she sped over the rooftops.

Sakura didn't see Hatake again before she was seeing them off as he and Tiger disappeared with the Uzumaki on a training trip. She tried to ignore that they left weeks after Monkey's death.

-

Shiranui sat beside her, their legs dangling from the edge of the roof and the entrance to the missions building across the street. A brown haired tokubetsu with notably wild curls left the building.

“Imamura Shig.” Sakura said, pointing down at the shinobi. “Tracking specialist, viper summons and does some niche sealing work for ANBU.”

“Uniformed.” Shiranui taunted. “Married to his third rich civilian wife after the first two tragically died in mysterious accidents and is known for finding his way into his teammate’s beds after missions.”

“Bullshit.”

“I swear on Raidō’s honour that it’s true.”

“I refuse to believe I wouldn’t have heard about a serial widower in the village.”

He shook his head, grimacing around the ever present senbon.

“They’re civilian casualties so they’re under the police’s purview but no one who has any idea how to do their job has been in charge since the massacre. I only know about it because I was fucking an Uchiha whilst he was investigating the first death.”

“At least that explains why he sets my instincts off.” She muttered. “Should he suffer a mysterious accident?”

“He’s been warned. And don’t act altruistic it’s creepy.” He said, sending a genuinely disturbed glance her way. She shrugged.

“What’s good for the village is good for me in the long run.”

“The deaths of a few civilians isn’t a significant enough impact to matter, Pinky.” His expression was unimpressed.

She scowled. “Maybe I just feel like it.”

“Aha and maybe I just feel like giving dog boy a mysterious accident.”

“You couldn’t hurt Kashi.”

“Well, no.” Shiranui admitted, senbon flapping with agitation and brows puckered with annoyance at the admission. “But I could get Gai to annoy the shit out of him for a few weeks.”

Sakura’s lips twitched despite herself, a mixture of fondness and good

humour warming her chest at the image of it, but she did her best to scowl disapprovingly. Her efforts were unsuccessful as Shiranui smirked triumphantly.

“You’re just pissy he wouldn’t get into bed with you.”

“Everyone knows he had that thing with Yamato.” Shiranui said, puffing up in mock offence. “And I’m basically Yamato but better looking!”

“Mhm, I don’t know about that.” She replied, a smile edging her mouth as she made a show of checking him out. He flipped his hair lounged dramatically.

“Darling, I am a catch.”

“You’re a catch of Carp.” Sakura said, grimacing as she remembered the muddy taste of the unfortunately common fish. Shiranui barked a startled laugh.

“But seriously, say the word and the asshole gets it.” He said and she smiled.

“I’ll take it under advisement.”

A green haired jōnin walked out of the building and Shiranui straightened to point at her as her listed her specialties.

-

The hawk came as she was heading back from a solo mission in the Land of Tea.

It had only been a B-rank but, with her essentially non-existent reserves, cleaning out an entire colony of giant, fire breathing tigers had gotten a little messy.

Sakura read the scroll and looked down at her blood-stained, half melted away long sleeved black top and pants. She’d long since abandoned the flak jacket after it had been mostly melted hard, also destroying the scroll with a change of clothes sealed inside, and had just been thankful her underwear had survived- her sports bra left completely untouched and her underpants only a *little* singed- and prepared herself for an uncomfortable journey back.

She looked at the small scroll and the words “Team Seven to support

Team Ten' with a location underneath and she sighed. It wasn't far, and she knew a village on the way where she could probably steal something.

And that was how Sakura found herself destroying yet another kimono, this one a dark purple that was almost black, for the sake of practicality. She couldn't do much about the blood splatters over everything on the time crunch she was on but she figured they could deal with it.

Sakura arrived to see a man bursting with tentacles, the black strings shooting out to wrap themselves around Yamanaka, Akimichi, and Hatake. Sakura launched forwards, her body wrapped in her elemental transformation until she was just a blur of blue and pink over the ground.

Kusanagi sliced through the three sets of tentacles as Tiger and Uzumaki appeared from the other direction and forced the tentacle man away with a combination of two ridiculous jutsus. She watched the two giant pillars with distant jealousy as she settled into place in front of the very beat up looking trio. She grinned cheerfully at them as the other three members of Team Kakashi settled next to her.

"Hey guys! Right in the nick of time, huh." She said.

"What happened to you?!" The Yamanaka asked.

"It's not my blood." Sakura replied, smiling reassuringly. The blonde did not look reassured.

"Reinforcements." The Akimichi sighed with audible relief. "We're saved."

"I've never seen you look so uncool." Tiger said, looking at a very dishevelled looking Hatake. "This opponent must be really strong."

So maybe Hatake was a little beyond dishevelled, with slightly too shallow breaths and bloodstains on the stomach of his shirt, but it wasn't life threatening and Sakura wasn't feeling particularly charitable towards the man at the moment.

The tentacle monster was watching her with narrowed eyes. "You're the boiler." He said, voice like two rocks scraping together. Sakura ignored him. So did everyone else. The tentacle monster became visibly incensed at the lack of response, but not enough to overwhelm his common sense and care him to wildly lash out at them.

“Where’s Shikamaru?” Uzumaki asked.

“Fighting with the enemy at a different location.” Akimichi replied.

“Two of us should go to Shikamaru’s side.” Hatake said, speeding through the summoning hand signs. “A long range type and a medical type would be best.” Pakkun puffed into existence.

“Follow me.” Said the pug.

“I’ll go.” Yamanaka said.

“Okay!” Said Tiger. “Sai and Ino follow Pakkun’s lead and go and back up Shikamaru.”

“Understood.” They said in unison before racing off.

“All that’s happened is the variation I have for hearts has increased.” Tentacle man rasped. “And when I’m finished I’ll be taking that one with me.” A hand floated upwards to point at Sakura.

An angry expression crossed the Uzumaki’s face and he stepped forward. “I’ll take it from here.”

“Did he complete it?” Hatake asked.

“...No.” Replied Tiger. “It’s about fifty percent.”

“I see.”

“However. Just watch, please. He’s a completely different person than before.”

If Tiger was happy with his abilities, then Sakura- as sore, tired and running on fumes as she was- was happy to sit back and let the Uzumaki do the heavy lifting. She kept her storm chakra circling just in case, but she settled into a more defensive stance and sheathed Kusanagi.

Sakura watched Uzumaki... test the enemy and then form a plan from that basis? With an incredulous expression. That was... different. Especially recently, since he’d come back from training with the Sannin and hit the brick wall of puberty head first, the Uzumaki’s attack strategies had largely seemed to devolve into just ‘get angry and use the kyuubi’s chakra’.

Then he made a giant ball of death.

Sakura had known the bijuu were essentially this world's version of atomic bombs. She had known the potential of the jinchūriki was unfathomable. But knowing it did not change how alarming it was to see the Uzumaki casually whip out something that felt like it could wipe out a small town. The massive coalescence of chakra hummed like muffled roaring of a tornado.

“Fūton: Rasen Shuriken!” He cried and the trio of clones charged in. Sakura did not move forward to try and help, not wanting to know what would happen if she got caught in the crossfire of that move, but she stayed ready to intercept if it was necessary.

As it turned out, it was.

The move fizzled out just before it connected with the tentacle man and Naruto was stuck, centimetres away from the enemy and with no method of attack. Sakura flickered to his side in an instant, grabbing him around the waist and- in a feat of strength only possible from her training with Gai- she threw him into the path of the already running Kakashi.

“Yamato!” Kakashi ordered, grabbing Naruto and returning to their ranks. Sakura felt tentacles sink into the skin of her shoulder as she unsheathed her sword, swiping it through the black strings and pouncing backwards. Tentacle man tried to follow but was stopped by a barrage of wood driving him backwards and away from her. Sakura returned to the others with a grimace, pulling out the black tentacles as she did.

“Daaaamn!” Uzumaki groaned.

“Nice moves, clone man.” She said with a slightly pained chuckle. “But maybe try hitting the guy next time?” She hovered a glowing green hand over her shoulder for a few short minutes. Monkey had forced enough medical jutsu down her throat for her to clot blood. A quick application of the skill stopped the bleeding from the numerous puncture wounds in her shoulder. Like a field bandage but quicker. And worse.

“With a name like Rasen shuriken I thought you’d throw it.” Akimichi said.

“What are you trying to say?!” The blonde yelled. “It’s awesome if I can hit them!!”

“Even if it’s called Rasen Shuriken it has to be a direct hit from a zero

distance.” Explained Tiger. “That’s why the basics of the jutsu is using shadow clones as a feint but the time limit is too short, it only lasts a couple of seconds.”

Hatake turned to look at her, raising a questioning eyebrow at her shoulder. She shook her head and definitely did not feel a burst of warmth in response to the man’s concern.

“They’re only shallow.” She said quietly and he nodded.

“Let me do this one more time.” Uzumaki said, glaring across the battlefield at tentacle man. “I’ll decide this with my new jutsu.”

And there was his childishness again.

“And why would we give in to such a selfish request?” Sakura asked, her face blank and her tone flat. Her shoulder throbbed and stung.

The Uzumaki’s face became determined and he begun spouting off about the fourth Hokage and dangerous bridges. Sakura watched, incredulous, as the others went with it.

Naruto sprang forward. The tentacle man became an even bigger tentacle man.

“Really sensei?” She deadpanned. “You’re letting him go in alone for a pissing contest with his dead da-”

“Maa, Sakura-chan.” Hatake pointedly interrupted. “Naruto is going through a very difficult time in a young man’s life and is feeling a little insecure. This way he either gains some self confidence or...” He raised his eyebrows and glanced at her shoulder meaningfully.

“He learns the importance of placing safety above everything else.” She said, her tone unimpressed. Had she ever pulled this shit as Tristan? She certainly didn’t remember doing so, but that could be the haze of hormones affecting her perception of things. “I still think it’s idiotic.” He ruffled her hair.

“Let the boys have their fun.”

Sakura watched as Uzumaki actually managed to get the jutsu to hit this time, the world exploding and dust clearing to reveal a massive crater. She glanced at the prone Uzumaki, decided that she was allowed to not be concerned for his safety whilst her shoulder was still screaming at her, and flickered to the edge of the crater, watching the

battered body of tentacle man drop into it's centre. She picked her way over to the slumped form.

"To be beaten by kids like you." The man rasped, Sakura drew Kusanagi. "Is this how you killed the others, let your comrades do the work and then steal the credit?"

"We're shinobi, not samurai." She replied tonelessly. "Don't act like honour matters." She positioned the blade over his heart and crouched down, dropping her voice to a taunting whisper. "And don't mistake letting the kid's play with you for a while for cowering behind the back lines." She shoved the sword through his chest and pumped eight percent of her chakra into it, melting the flesh around the wound.

Once that was done and the man was definitely dead, she sheathed her sword and flickered back up to the top of the crater, finally letting her storm chakra die down.

Hatake looked at her then glanced back towards the crater. "You couldn't have brought the body?"

"I'm tired, sensei." She pouted and he sighed, jumping in over the edge next to her. Dealing with a corpse, wounded and exhausted as he was, seemed suitable enough punishment for avoiding her for weeks.

"Alright everyone, let's go back to Konoha, shall we?"

-

Sakura saw the hit before it was going to happen.

Cat and her were back to back, each fighting off three men at once. Otter was panting and facing chakra exhaustion as he sent wave after wave of ninjutsu at the enemies. Badger- their new medic and a fire user- was working overtime to stabilise the man so that he didn't bleed out from the hole in his back.

They'd manage to pin down almost the entirety of the enemy forces while she worked, focused on protecting the pair until they no longer needed it and they could work to gain the upper hand in the fight.

"I'm done!" Badger cried, voice breathless. Sakura and Cat pushed forwards in response, opening a path through their enemies and gaining some ground. Kusanagi whirled through the air, biting into the stomach of one man and the leg of another. Her storm chakra wrapped around her. She caught the blur of movement out of the

corner of her eye.

A single shinobi, hands positioned over his mouth to perform a jutsu, looking straight down the gap into their defences they'd just left in an effort to end the fight quickly. His gaze trained on their medic, who was only just switching back into battle mode and wouldn't be able to dodge.

Sakura was flickering before she'd even fully registered the thought. Grabbing Badger and leaping. She avoided being hit in the chest with the water sickle but it smashed into her right thigh instead. She landed heavily and rolled, her leg completely unresponsive to her attempts to move it.

"DUCK!" She shouted and her team obeyed instinctively. Most of the enemy did not. Kusanagi was rapidly pointed skywards and most of her remaining chakra was poured into the tip, a massive, dripping ring of storm chakra appearing and spinning outwards, slicing through bodies and trees and rocks alike. It stopped about thirty metres out from her position, leaving a line of melted destruction where it had passed.

She watched in vicious satisfaction as the man who'd launched the jutsu was torn in half. These people were *hers*. *How dare* he try and hurt them.

Her teammates were already moving, Cat and Otter working together to finish the last of the enemy shinobi off as Badger threw herself into treating Sakura's leg.

The small window of shock from the wound ended and the pain kicked in. Her world went hazy. Her ears were ringing. Her existence shrunk to the burning in her leg.

Sakura was vaguely aware that there were fingers in her flesh and someone was pulling her onto a back but her mind couldn't latch onto the who or the where.

All she knew was pain and that something very Not Good would happen if she let herself go to sleep.

So instead she clung to consciousness. Counted her breaths until something would jolt and a wave of white would lead to her forgetting how to count. And then she would scream. Scream until she realised there was a gag in her mouth and wonder who would gag her? Why did she have to be silent?

Where they in-?

The world whited out and she went back to screaming. Hazy images and people floating past her eyes.

In. Out. In. Out. In. Out.

Her eyes were closed. She forced them open again. There were no trees anymore. Just hands. Pushing and forcing her down as leather closed around her wrists.

NO.

She thrashed violently, the pain in her leg turning everything white as she did and she screamed. There were voices and thuds of untrained people running. Her eyes swung wildly under her mask, looking for something *anything* she knew but her brain was too hazy and people's faces too indistinct.

Her gaze caught on a needle and she thrashed, flung herself violently against the restraints. She felt the right one begin to loosen just as a gentle finger came to tap on the sensitive skin of her forearm.

Tap. Tap. Taptaptaptap. Tap. Tap. Taptaptaptap.

She stilled immediately, her screams fell silent. She was safe.

Sakura let herself drift off to blissful unconsciousness.

“INCOMPETENT IDIOTS! WE GIVE THEM TRAINING LIKE THIS FOR A REASON! NOW GIVE ME THOSE INJECTIONS STA-”

-

Sakura woke to an incredibly annoying beeping noise and the slight itchiness of over-washed linen. She didn't need to open her eyes to know she was in the hospital.

Like all good shinobi, and especially good ANBU, she felt the immediate and irrepressible urge to escape.

Unfortunately, judging by the way her right leg refused to move entirely and sent spikes of pain at her when she tried to sit up, she did not think that would be possible this time. Still, she wasn't ANBU for nothing and she made a valiant effort, making it all the way to propped up on her elbows before she had to pause to gasp for breath.

The room was spinning rather strangely.

“And what do you think you’re doing?!” Came an angry voice from her left. Sakura’s eyes swivelled and she stared at the exceedingly stressed looking Hokage.

“What’s happened?” She asked, staring at the small wrinkle from constantly furrowed brows and the way the Hokage’s shirt just wasn’t sitting right. The woman scowled.

“Lay back down immediately.” She snarled, a hand with a single chipped nail pressing down on Sakura’s shoulder until she complied. “Orochimaru and Uchiha Itachi are dead. Uchiha Sasuke killed them.”

Sakura’s eyebrows raised. “Sasuke killed Itachi? Are we certain?”

“That’s the intel we have.”

She huffed irritably. Uchiha hadn’t been anywhere near Itachi’s level when they fought, so either he got dramatically stronger in an alarmingly short period of time or something else was at play there.

“And Sasuke?”

“Taken by Akatsuki.”

“Shit.”

“Shit indeed.

“Now you were lucky, exceptionally lucky, with your leg.” The Hokage started, looking at Sakura seriously. “The jutsu essentially completely shattered a ring of your right femur and severed the muscles almost all the way through. Your medic is an exceptionally talented individual, she recognised this and focused on keeping you alive until you reached the hospital, clamping a lot of the arteries and physically holding together a few others. Most field medics simply would have performed emergency medical jutsu and, whilst this would have saved your life, you would have been left with a permanent limp and likely unable to continue being a shinobi.”

“Make her a giant bag of cookies, got it.” Sakura said and the Hokage snorted.

“I offered her a position as my personal intern but she refused, said the stress would do her in.” The Hokage laughed humourlessly.

“Anyway we’ve healed most of the damage but we had to stop about two thirds of the way through the surgery because your body wouldn’t have been able to take anymore foreign chakra. As it is you’ll experience some mild pain if you try to cast a jutsu.” The woman’s eyes narrowed considerably. “How does your system feel for you at the moment?”

Sakura frowned a little. “Like my chakra tubes have been scalded. Not quite damaged and not quite painful but definitely verging on it.”

“Hmm, well I’d normally say a week with no chakra use but for you you’re welcome to judge it yourself.” Sakura nodded. “You have a second surgery in…” The woman twisted and glanced at the clock. “Five hours, though it’s just the last few stages of healing so it shouldn’t make that discomfort any worse. After that we’ll run you through some rehab testing, realistically there shouldn’t be anything that will prevent you from going back on active duty but I have some concerns about weakening in that femur.

“As such you’ll be permanently on the guard duty roster for the next four months with weekly checkups to see how it holds up. Someone else will sub in for your position on Team Ro.”

Sakura felt a horrible trickling of apprehension. She hadn’t failed to feed the monster for that long since the chūnin exams. Thinking back on it, she didn’t think she’d failed to feed the monster for longer than a couple of *weeks* since she joined ANBU. This would be... interesting.

(She’d tried to quit just once when she’d been Tristan, right after he’d had his first child. He’d started up again after he found himself waking during the night to stare at his wife and newborn, vivid fantasies of ripping their hearts out of their chests playing behind his eyes.)

Chapter End Notes

Completely tangential rant, but I've always found it pretty dumb how fiction tends to portray nightmares. I don't have anything as extreme as PTSD but I've had my fair share of traumatic experiences and a series of therapists to try to deal with those experiences and yet I've never once had a memory style nightmare. In fiction it's always 'ahhhh I'm at that place where the thing happened and oh no the thing is happening and maybe if the author is really creative my loved ones will appear and tell me all of my psychological issues in an easy to digest format! Noooooo!' when in reality my nightmares tend to be entirely

incomprehensible and more often than not objectively not scary. For example, last night I woke up in cold sweat after having a nightmare where I was lying on my back in the middle of a grassy field on a bright sunny day and a giant, living teddy bear used my stomach as a pillow whilst I cried. According to my brain this is a valid cause for adrenaline soaked terror.

What do you guys think? Are memory nightmares just a lazy product of fiction or are they normal and I'm just fucking weird?

Living in the Village

Chapter Summary

Sakura puzzles some pieces and loses some things.

Chapter Notes

I ran out of the sleep juice and haven't slept in a long so pl excuse any errors and lack of funnies in the summaries. I'll try and think of something when I'm not hallucinating shadow people.

(◡‿◡)

Post-sleep edit: I'm not changing anything because in the light of day it's hilarious. Doubly so because I was at the point of trying not to cry I was so upset at the 'lack of funnies'. Don't run out of meds when you're a chronic insomniac and then take NoDoz because you don't want to cancel on a friend three days into your own personal Nightmare on Elm Street, kids!

When Sakura awoke it was to an annoying beeping noise, the scratchy feeling of over-washed linen and the sight of a sullen Uzumaki sitting by her bedside. She was in a hospital and like any good shinobi, especially good ANBU, she felt the immediate and irrepressible urge to escape.

This attempt was far more successful than the last and she got to sitting with only minimal difficulty, the last of the anaesthetic making the world spin strangely and her limbs feel oddly detached from herself.

“Sakura-chan! You’re awake!” The Uzumaki cried and she suddenly had her arms and lap full of orange and yellow, effectively cutting her escape attempt short.

“Hey, Naruto.” She said softly. “I’m glad to see you’re alright.” The boy wilted in her arms, returning to the plastic chair next to her bed with a crushed expression.

“They got Sasuke.” He said, voice dejected. “We weren’t fast enough and they took him.”

“That’s alright, I’m positive you did your best.” Sakura said, patting a knee comfortingly even as her eyes traced the room for escape

options. “We’ll just have to get him next time.”

“I don’t know.” Uzumaki whispered, like he was sharing a massive secret rather than perfectly reasonable doubts when faced with their success history. “I just... feel like I don’t understand him anymore.”

Sakura paused from where she’d been rummaging through the various cupboards and drawers, looking for her stuff, and turned back to him with a frown. She weighed her options for a moment. On the one hand, she really just wanted to leave, grab a smoothie and go see if she could find Hatake or Shiranui to bother. On the other, Uzumaki was genuinely distraught about this and simply walking out on him would make their friendship suffer.

She wasn’t really attached to Uzumaki, not in the way she was attached to a few others in her life, but she’d put a lot of effort into their friendship and she did feel some affection for the boy. Uzumaki was like a particularly well trained working animal. She’d put effort into shaping their relationship into one he’d be dependant on positioning herself as his emotional support so she could reap the rewards of such a relationship when he was politically powerful (he was the son of the fourth, favoured by the past and current Hokages- not to mention the Kazekage- and would be ridiculously powerful at his peak. Him making his dream of Hokage just seemed inevitable). That effort had taken time which had led to her feeling possessive over what she’d built and experience a spillover into genuine camaraderie. What had, at first, been grating and obnoxious had grown on her to become endearing. His enthusiastic overeagerness and determined optimism now made him seem more like Labrador than a brightly coloured wasp.

“I’m afraid I don’t get what you mean.” She said, the decision obvious. She couldn’t throw years of work under the bus just because she was grouchy, no matter how tempting smoothies were.

“It’s just...” Uzumaki looked unsure before becoming suddenly determined. “Why didn’t he come back after killing Orochimaru? After killing Itachi? What’s he driven by? Why is he going so far for any of this? I don’t get it!” His eyes were glassy as he spewed his frustrations. Sakura blinked back at him.

“Do you need to?” She asked and he frowned, confused.

“Of course! He’s my friend, isn’t he? Shouldn’t I understand where he’s coming from?” Uzumaki seemed genuinely perplexed and Sakura

hummed, grabbing the bundle of clothes and weaponry and placing it on the bed, hiking herself to sit on the bedsheets and stare at him seriously.

“It’s impossible to completely understand another person, Naruto.” She said and he seemed to wilt. “Everyone has different experiences, everyone has different ways of thinking and everyone has different feelings. Even two identical twins who were never separated from birth will have slightly different perspectives from each other. And you know what?” She smiled. “That’s what makes humans so amazing!”

“What do you mean?” He asked. “If we can’t understand each other how can we ever live together peacefully?”

“What makes Konoha so great? Why do we have such a great track record compared to, say, Kirigakure?”

“The trees?”

“Teamwork!” She replied and he smiled sheepishly. “But why is teamwork so effective?”

“Um, because it lets people use their unique abilities in conjunction with each other, maximising their potential?” The Uzumaki said in the manner of someone repeating a phrase that had been belted into their head. She nodded.

“Exactly! If I put you and Shino on a team and told you to capture a giant rhinoceros, could you work together to use your individual, unique abilities and capture that rhino far more quickly and efficiently than you could have each done on your own?” She asked and he nodded, expression pinched. “Do you understand the mechanism behind Shino’s bugs? The exact relationship between him and the hive, or how he controls them during battle?”

“No, not at all.”

“Right! Because you don’t need to perfectly understand a person to work together with them, you just need to respect their differences and have the compassion to listen and take into account their own feelings and experiences.” She said, Uzumaki had a look of dawning hope on his face. “Finding peace with each other isn’t about thinking exactly the same, but instead about understanding that you will never fully understand a person, that their unique perspective doesn’t hamper your relationship, but instead broaden it. Every single person

on this earth has something that's purely their own to give. Cherishing what makes us each different and being cherished for our differences in return is what makes the bonds between us truly special.

"At least, that's just my personal perspective on things, as a friend I would cherish getting to hear your own sometime."

Uzumaki looked lost in thought so she took the opportunity to dig out a scroll with a fresh change of clothes and dress in the corner. A more civilian outfit, she found herself clad in a soft yellow sundress that's short skirt stopped conveniently above her thigh holsters. Ninja sandals strapped on and Kusanagi slung over her back, she felt suitably like she hadn't been unconscious in a hospital room for days. She tied on her forehead protector, put her hair into a quick bun and grinned at the Uzumaki.

"Come on, Naruto. I'll shout you lunch if you assist with my daring escape." She said and he smiled at her, looking far more cheered than he had a few minutes ago.

"Careful Sakura-chan, should you be moving around already?" A voice drawled from the doorway. She turned shot a poisonous look at the slouched man. Hatake did not look up from his porn.

"What the medics don't know won't hurt them." She said, echoing his own response to the question.

"Unfortunately, the Godaime needs to see us." He said, closing the book with a clap. "I'm on strict orders not to let you walk until you've been checked out, so..." A wheelchair appeared in front of him.

"I refuse." Sakura deadpanned, his eye turned into a puppy dog look.

"You'd make me disobey the Hokage?" His voice comically shocked. Sakura opened her mouth to argue back but something in his expression stopped her. His eye was a little too lined, a little too pinched, and there was an unusual weight dragging down his shoulders. A terrible feeling rose in her gut and she clicked her mouth closed, huffed in annoyance and plonked down onto the seat, shifting Kusanagi between her legs.

A lump landed on her lap as she did and she blinked. It was a teddy bear, perfectly generic looking and around the size of the average baby. It looked like the kind of thing you'd win off an incredibly cheap carnival game.

Sakura loved it.

She positioned it against her side and found a completely genuine grin on her face.

“Off we go then, my lazy chauffeur!” She said with a flourish and Hatake twisted the wheelchair to point out the door, calling behind him.

“C’mon Naruto.”

They headed for the Hokage’s office, Sakura finding she actually quite enjoyed being able to sit back and relax for the journey. She resolved to put off getting her leg checked out for as long as possible.

The white-haired Sannin’s summons were outside the office and refused to share any information with a very confused Uzumaki, causing the twisting in her stomach to only grow worse. It didn’t help that she could see Hatake’s hands tightening out of the corner of her vision the closer they got to Hokage tower.

They entered the office to find the Hokage, New Kid, the Hokage’s assistant, a series of toad’s and even the Hokage’s assistant’s pig all wearing morose expressions. New Kid in particular, despite his face being almost entirely blank, looked extremely concerned for Uzumaki. Hatake pushed her wheelchair over to one side, next to New Kid, and leant against the handles. His knuckles were white.

“So this here boy’s Jiraiya-chan’s pupil?” The old toad asked. Sakura eyed the creature warily. In the civilian world old meant fragile, but this was a ninja toad. In the ninja world, old meant *dangerous*.

“Yes, this is Uzumaki Naruto.” Said the Hokage, her eyes looking suspiciously close to tears. “The ‘destined child’ I supposed.” Sakura’s eyebrows furrowed.

Did this world have *prophecy*?!

“A grandpa frog now? What gives?” Uzumaki said, showing his usual amount of tact.

“What your tone Naruto!” Snapped the Hokage. “This is one of the great head hermits of Myouboku Mountain, Fukasaku-sama! He came all the way here to help you!”

“Head Hermit Toads, if you wanna get all formal.” Said the toad.

“Anyways, you’re Jiraiya-chan’s pupil, yeah?”

“Chan?... Chan?! What, do you think Ero-Sennin’s your summoned animal! What the hell’s old wrinkly frog’s problem.” Sakura wondered if Uzumaki was completely incapable of reading a room, or if his odd perceptiveness was striking again and he was simply getting aggressive to distract from the fact the room felt like a funeral.

“I said watch your mouth! He’s Jiraiya-sama’s teacher, a great and wise figure who taught him hermit-style ninjutsu!”

“Haha! Ero-Sennin! Ya got the same attitude as yer master, kiddo!”

“All right, old toad, what do you wanna tell me?”

“Where do I start...” The toad’s face crumpled back to devastated.
“Guess I’d better just say it. Jiraiya-chan was killed in battle.”

Sakura’s breath caught and she unconsciously leant forward in her seat. Whoever had killed the white-haired Sannin would have to have been monstrously strong.

Her hearing picked up the almost completely inaudible, unnaturally controlled breaths behind her. The sound of someone forcing themselves into calm.

Had the Sannin and Hatake been close? She supposed it made sense, the pervert had trained the fourth and the fourth had trained Hatake after all. He would have been the shinobi equivalent of a grandson or a nephew to the white haired Sannin.

Sakura shifted under the guise of taking the weight off her leg, just ‘coincidentally’ touching the bare skin of her neck to where Hatake’s thumb was sitting over the front of the handle. She flickered her signature to mimic his and back again, the flow of warmth starting and stopping in question.

The thumb, and Hatake’s breathing, froze for a moment before it shifted to press further into her skin. She flickered her signature back to mimicking his and enjoyed the warmth. As she hadn’t gotten to since the night Monkey died.

A night she had deeply regretted since, considering she’d clearly freaked Kakashi out and inadvertently stopped the chakra sharing altogether. It was like she’d gotten addicted to having long, hot baths filled with expensive bath bombs and the best fragrances every night

and then she'd cried in it and covered the bathroom's floors with blood and entrails and her bath had run away forever as a result, leaving her relying on nothing but cold buckets of water for her cleanliness.

She listened to the retelling of the fight even as she kept half an ear focused on the way Kakashi's breathing was evening out and becoming more natural. Once it had stabilised the thumb disappeared but she kept her signature matching his- half in hope, half in invitation- and couldn't stop the way her hands' grip on Kusanagi relaxed a little when the thumb returned halfway through the toad's retelling.

"During the fight Pein crushed poor Jiraiya-chan's throat. Before he fell for the last time, he left one final message." The old toad whipped off his cloak and turned around, revealing numbers carved into his back.

There was a conversation happening around her but Sakura was stuck on the idea of toads having a concept of nudity. Most of the intelligent seeming toads wore some kind of clothing, was modesty a concept in ninja toads? Was this old toad doing the equivalent of flashing for toads? Did he have a significant other that should be getting mad at this?

...Did toads have significant others?

Then the Hokage was telling the story of the 'destined child' and Sakura was absorbed again. Apparently this world *did* have prophecies. What did that suggest about free will? Did Sakura's presence affect it or was she also destined to exist?

Unfortunately for Sakura, the tale ended fairly quickly and everyone but her was ordered to leave. She mourned the loss of the warmth as Hatake left. The Hokage gave her a quick examination, glowing green hand being kept pressed over her leg as she went through a series of stretches and movements, and proclaimed her free to walk on her own if not to train before she had a more in depth scan. In a show of pettiness, Sakura left the wheelchair behind as she left, her brand new teddy bear clutched against her chest.

The itchy discomfort of her scalded chakra system had slowly come back during the process, making her moodier than usual. It was something she hadn't even registered had disappeared when she was absorbing Hatake's chakra, but now was painfully obvious.

Sakura headed home grumpy, mind whirling through what she'd learn about the fight. There was something niggling about it, some suspicion she should be able to put the pieces together, but she just couldn't pin it down.

She scowled.

(Hatake found her that night and drained the rest of his reserves before disappearing, from that point onwards he started once again finding her every night they were both in the village.)

-

Sakura rapidly began to settle into a routine. She had a specialised eating plan, frequent doctors visits and scheduled shifts like a paper ninja.

The guard duty was not completely unenjoyable, it was set up so that for each twenty four hours there were four teams of four. Two for each twelve, the two squads swapping between guarding and taking a break every two hours. For the most part the squads used those breaks to train, running drills and throwing themselves into spars. It meant that whilst Sakura spent a very boring six hours a day in full stealth, perched in the rafters over the Hokage's head, the continuous amount of time spent like that wasn't long enough to be physically uncomfortable and she was able to spend a lot of time honing her skills.

The problem, however, was her increasingly growing brutality as the days went by.

She found herself having to consciously avoid using chakra-enhanced punches, automatically lunging for fatal points and having to turn away at the last second. It was becoming more and more difficult to simply end the fight when the spar was finished.

She considered begging to be let out on a mission, but held back. As much as the Hokage was aware she was a psychopath that enjoyed killing- the psychological evaluations in this world were actually competent- admitting to needing to kill to the point where she was worried she might end up attacking her own comrades would simply make her a liability and Sakura would inevitably be thrown into a padded cell in psych.

So instead, to distract from the increasingly aggravated monster inside her, she focused on making her enforced time within the village as

productive as possible.

The first step to doing so was trying every restaurant in the village. She dragged any number of tagalongs with her, dipping into her frankly ridiculous amount of savings to shout people meals.

The second step was losing this body's virginity. Sakura was curious and she was a few days away from seventeen with a body that- whilst distinctly petite, short with lithe muscle and delicate bones instead of significant curves- could no longer be mistaken for a child's. Sakura had no moral hangups about putting on one of her skimpier outfits, heading to a bar and letting the attractive older man with the honey coloured hair pick her up.

Considering the age of consent in this world- at least in the villages, the more rural you went the more backwards civilians became and it wasn't uncommon for girls to be married off as soon as they got their first period- was fifteen and her status was a jōnin likely meant no one would've have been prosecuted if she'd had sex earlier- even if it would have been heavily frowned upon and the other party probably would have been lynched by Shiranui and Hatake- no one else would have any issues with her decision either. Well, no one she needed to listen too.

-

Sakura absentmindedly pulled the cigarette out of the man's mouth before he could light it.

He groaned and slid further into the bed. "Tracking?" He guessed, voice half muffled by a pillow..

"Assassination." She corrected, grabbing Kusanagi from the bedside and padding across the room to pick up her clothes. She distantly noted that the pile had more weaponry than fabric and eyed where she'd propped Kusanagi.

Was she being paranoid?

She dismissed the thought. She was in ANBU, of course she was paranoid. It wasn't like she hadn't killed people whilst they were distracted having sex before.

"Can I use your shower?" She asked and the man under the mass of blankets made a vaguely affirmative sounding grunt.

She showered, dressed, and slipped out the bathroom window.

Sex was... different in this body. As Tristan he would orgasm and he would feel good. Simple, straightforward, easy to understand. Sakura, however, had come twice during the experience and yet felt entirely indifferent to the whole business.

She sighed and dug a pair of cookie dough balls from the freezer, absentmindedly grabbing a second pair when there was a soft thud on her living room windowsill.

The freshly baked cookies in one hand and two glasses of milk in the other, Sakura headed for the dining room to see Hatake already sitting at a chair, porn in hand. Kusanagi left in the kitchen. She settled into the chair next to him, putting down the cookies and automatically taking his outstretched hand, signature mimicking his. There was a strange tension in his shoulders but she was too wrapped up in her own thoughts and the itchy feeling of the monster under her skin to read into it.

Sakura relaxed into the chair and let her mind quiet. Her eyes flutter shut and her more murderous impulses lessen.

The comfortable silence reigned as Kakashi's chakra drained and the cookies disappeared.

All too soon, the warmth settled down to an enjoyable hum and in the next second Hatake had disappeared in a swirl of leaves.

She frowned. It had been a while since he'd shunshined away.

-

Sakura watched the group bundle in from the rafters, the Uzumaki practically bouncing where he stood as they waited for the messenger to return with the old toad.

"We should get Sakura and Sai, as well!" He proclaimed and the Hokage shook her head.

"Sai is out of the village on a mission. Sakura is busy." She said and Uzumaki scowled, pacing with agitation. Sakura smiled as Hatake casually scratched his chin and used the movement to disguise looking over the ANBU in the rafters. He wouldn't be able to see her, but he would be able to spot the other three. Considering there were four guards on the Hokage at all times, he could likely guess she was there.

Sakura wasn't entirely sure how Hatake knew everything that happened in the ANBU but she was half sure he was bribing the commander. Or the commander was trying to bribe Hatake back into the shadow ranks.

The old toad and his living wheelchair moved into the room, the toad looking curiously between the assembly. The toad hopped up onto the Hokage's desk and Uzumaki handed him a sheet of paper.

"We've cracked the code Ero-Sennin left on you!" He exclaimed.

"The real one isn't with them?" The toad asked and Sakura's brows furrowed, a niggling in the back of her brain telling her that she *should* know the answer to this, but she didn't know why.

"All right Papa Sennin, what do you think?" The Uzumaki asked, visibly growing more and more distressed the longer the toad didn't say anything. "Does it make sense to you?"

"Dunno." The toad said. "This' too vague to give a definite answer."

"Okay," Said the Nara. "But what was your first thought when you read it?"

"I've already told you all I know about Pein, these are men who've revived themselves from the dead, I ain't going to start makin' guesses."

Sakura tilted her head. It sounded similar what to Sasori-

She froze. They were *puppets*. The real one wasn't with them because they were *all* puppets, just being controlled by another body from a distance somehow.

She spent half a second changing her hair black before she jumped off the rafters, landing next to the group in a crouch and stopping her transparency jutsu.

"Hokage-sama." She said tonelessly. Uzumaki jumped wildly and twisted to look at her, as did the very frazzled looking member of the cryptology department. The Nara flinched but Hatake, the Hokage and the old toad simply turned to look at her entirely calmly.

"Sparrow, you have something to say?" The Hokage said, curiosity in her voice.

“Sasori of the Red Sand used human bodies as puppets.” She explained and the Nara sucked in a breath in realisation. “From the Hermit Head Toad’s description of the fight and the clue, it sounds as though Pein is using something similar to the Yamanaka clan techniques and controlling the dead bodies as puppets.”

“The real one isn’t with them!” The Nara proclaimed. “They’re all just puppets, being controlled by one man, that would explain their shared knowledge and ability to share lines of vision!”

“Anything else to add, Sparrow?” The Hokage said.

“No, Hokage-sama.”

“Return to your post.” She said and Sakura swept her transparency jutsu back on, leaping into the rafters.

“Who was that? Why was there an ANBU in your office?” The Uzumaki said.

“Sparrow is a member of my guard.” The Hokage replied, the Nara was muttering under his breath.

“You have bodyguards?” The Uzumaki asked, tone genuinely incredulous.

“I’m the Hokage.” She deadpanned.

“So long as we cannot get to the main body, we won’t be able to defeat Pein, but if we could figure out the mechanism behind *how* the man is controlling them, we might be able to track it back to the source and take him down.” The Nara said. “We likely won’t be able to figure out any further until the interrogation and autopsy is complete, but they should be informed of the new revelations.”

“I’ll leave that to you, Shikamaru.” She said and the Nara nodded, heading for the doors. The Cryptology member trailed after him.

Uzumaki made a scene, but the old toad headed it off before it could become a real problem with the promise of more training.

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The guards disappeared and the Hokage swiped a bloody thumb under her desk. Barrier seals slamming into place.

“This is an S-rank mission.” The Hokage said, her voice and expression

serious. “Completely off the books and purely between us.”

“Another favour.” Sakura said and the woman nodded.

“What do you want in return?”

“I’m not sure.” Sakura replied, tipping her head. “How about an IOU?”

“Fine, but it has to be reasonable.” The Hokage said and Sakura nodded acceptance easily. “Shimura Danzō is too dangerous to be allowed to continue but he is also too powerful to be taken down legally.”

“You want me to assassinate him.”

Sakura almost smiled against the wave of relief. It looked like the monster would be fed after all. Her skin had started feeling too tight for her body and food had had begun tasting like anything from cardboard to lemon juice. Even as she watched the Hokage images of the woman’s throat slit and the fresh blood on Sakura’s hands were playing behind her eyes.

She needed this.

“Yes.” The Senju said. “I want you to kill him inside the ROOT headquarters, make it look like an inside job, and then make enough commotion ‘escaping’ to allow me to send an ANBU squad to investigate.”

“With only thirty percent of my chakra available.” Sakura sighed.

“I have faith in your abilities.”

“It’s going to be a big favour.” She warned.

“I could make you my successor?” The Hokage said hopefully, Sakura snorted.

“You’re not getting out of hell that easily, Hokage-sama.”

Pein.

Chapter Summary

Dead.

Sakura managed to peel off the scent-masking top before she gave up entirely, sinking into a chair and burying her face in her arms. She'd been using her spare moment she had to map out the underground tunnels in preparation for Shimura's death. She'd been getting the bare minimum amount of sleep in exchange for long hours forcing pathways and room layouts into her brain. She couldn't risk physical copies of any of the information, couldn't risk anything that could incriminate her in Shimura's murder, and it made everything five times harder than it had to be otherwise.

The sleeplessness was nothing she hadn't dealt with before, missions oft required long days of wakefulness, either to stake out an area or to travel at top speeds, but they were generally offset by periods of meditative states. Stake outs and running required little in the way of mental exertion and energy could be rationed for periods requiring higher levels of alertness. Even when she'd been sacrificing the exact same hours to transcribe the ROOT archives she hadn't had to think much, copying files descending into a purely mechanical process.

But this was different. Her nights were spent exploring and planning and memorising. She had to create contingency after contingency to perfect the assassination all without acting in any way different during her ever-busy days. She could handle not sleeping but the sheer stress of thinking almost twenty four seven was making her brain feel like it was going to melt out of her ears.

Sakura groaned, and sunk a bit further onto her table. She should go to bed, should maximise the time she had to switch her brain off, but the thought of moving, when she knew she had a blissful two and a half hours until Team Seven had to meet up that she could use to just not move instead, was a painful one.

She was pulled from sleep by a quiet thump, the sound of someone landing on the windowsill, and she contemplated whether lifting her head to see who it was would be worth it.

Sakura snorted into her arms. Who was she kidding? There was only one person that managed to effortlessly evade every trap she set up,

no matter how complicated. Even the one time that the Hokage had tried to personally drag Sakura out of bed to beat the shit out of her after a particularly trying day filled with idiots had ended in Sakura having to cut the woman out of ninja wire.

Now the Hokage just stands outside her bedroom window and screams.

A very annoying finger starting poking her in the ear. Sakura groaned and batted it away. It switched to poking her in her side.

She lifted her head and glared blearily. Hatake, the fucking asshole, just eye-smiled down at her like he wasn't interrupting her glorious napping hours.

"What?" She slurred irritably. He had the fucking gall to look amused.

"That's not a bed, Sakura-chan." He said. She glared at him for a few moments before she huffed and buried her head back into her arms. He hummed and warm fingers threaded through her hair, cradling the back of her head and tilting it until one eye was exposed. She cracked the eye open so she could glare at him again, only mildly disorientated when his face came into view next to hers rather than above. "You're working too hard."

She snorted and turned her face back into her arms. "Fuck off." She grumbled, ignoring the tingling pull on her scalp where his grip had tightened.

Shimura was a threat. The monster was a threat. The sheer amount of bloodlust she was feeling for the people around her was a threat.

The sooner threats were neutralised the sooner her people were safe.

He hummed again, hand idly fiddling in her hair.

"Alright." Hatake stood abruptly and Sakura definitely did not squeak as a hand wrapped around her waist and he lifted her under an arm like she was some kind of wayward chicken he was carrying back to the pen. She may have spent a moment flailing but she blamed that on the shock. Sakura was a dignified woman who did not squeak or cross her arms or pout as she was lugged up her own stairs.

"I hate you."

"Mhm."

“You’re a dick.”

“Mhm.”

“Your hair is dumb.”

“Aah.” He pulled back the duvet and dumped her on the bed before throwing the blanket haphazardly back over her. She grumbled but dutifully rolled herself into a burrito and squeezed her eyes shut. After a few seconds of clicking noises interrupting her decent into unconsciousness she opened her eyes again and squinted at Hatake as he fiddled with her alarm.

“Wha’?”

“Just show up before lunchtime.” He said without glancing at her. “I’ll tell the others I sent you stealth training.” It took Sakura a few seconds but when it clicked what he was doing her vision blurred as her eyes threatened grateful tears. She sniffled.

He was giving her a whole extra six hours to sleep.

“Kashi.” She said, her voice embarrassingly shaky. Hatake pressed a final button on the alarm and turned to look at her, eyebrow raised. “You’re the best.”

He nodded sagely. Then shunshined away.

Fucking asshole.

-

Screams drifted in through the windows, overlaid by the occasional explosion that set vibrations through the walls. Plumes of dust and rock shrapnel rose over distant buildings as chaos waged in the village. Sakura was perched on a wall, invisible, of the Hokage’s office as she watched the pandemonium. Currently distant but rapidly working its way through the village streets.

One of the men that were on the barrier squad detail burst through the door, the wood listing off one hinge from the violence of the entrance, and he stumbled into a kneel. His eyes were wide and panicked, sweat dripping down the sides of his face and mouth moving silently under terror.

Otter moved fluidly into a kneel next to the terrified shinobi and the

man visibly collected himself from the ANBU's calm. A deep, hitching breath in, out, then he talked.

Konohagakure was under attack.

"Alert the entire village we're under an emergency situation and then call Naruto back." The Hokage ordered, her image firm with power as she stood before the massive windows. Her voice rang with promise as it carried over the room. When she turned to the small toad on her desk her face had the hardened bearing of a general. The expression of the woman who was forged in one of the bloodiest wars in the Elemental Nations' history.

"Gotcha! I'ma go get Naruto right now!"

"We're all counting on you." The Hokage replied.

The door gave a pitiful squeal as it was pushed open once more, a wizened hand clasp the edge with a barely-there tremor.

"Stay where you are." The old woman said, jowls giggling with every pitiful wheeze. The council woman took shuffling steps into the room. A harsh frown on her face. She was backed by another old fool, as though numbers could possibly excuse trying to usurp the authority of the Hokage during an emergency. "We must leave Naruto at Myouboku Mountain."

"What did you say?!"

"Danzō has informed us that our attacker is none other than Akatsuki's leader and he's come here to take our jinchūriki, Naruto." The old man said, his voice calm and words flowing in a gentle cadence as though *their village wasn't currently under attack*.

The ANBU in the rafters shifted uneasily. Sakura could practically taste Cheetah's anger as he silently drew his tantō. It would only take a short signal from the Hokage and these fools would be dead.

"So what?" The Hokage's features were twisting. Anger and incredulity battling for dominance. The scent of smoke and blood and chaos began to seep into the room.

"We let you get away with this last time, but this is a completely different situation. Naruto is still a child, and this enemy personally killed Jiraiya!" The old woman insisted. "If Naruto falls, Akatsuki obtains the Kyuubi. Thus, we cannot-"

The Hokage charged and grabbed the pair by their collars, lifting them off the ground. Sakura smiled viciously at the terrified expressions on their faces.

“What’s the meaning of this?” The old lady tried to demand but her voice was shaky with fear. The delicate beads in her hair clinked in time with every terrified quiver.

The Hokage cut them down, her words clear and untainted by the rage hardening her back. Their philosophy was flawed and she pounced on their problems with the skill and finesse of a outstanding public speaker. By the time she was finished even the fools looked ashamed. Sakura would much rather see their blood on her hands but there was merit to this. In humiliating the wilfully blind.

The council members retreated, like battered dogs with their tails between their legs, and they were quickly forgotten as the Hokage snapped orders and led the group to the roof.

The monster raged and snarled beneath Sakura’s skin. Bayed for blood. Demanded that she force the intruders out of her village. It was making her skin crawl. Her meat bag’s cover too tight, too warm. Her edges to sharp and the pressure too high. She had gone too long pushing down her instincts and now they were rising up in triplicate in response to *threat*.

She did her best to ignore it.

Disobeying the orders of the Hokage and leaving her duties as a member of the guard would constitute desertion. Sakura could quite possibly end up executed or in prison for doing so. It was terrible timing, but she only had to last the next day before she’d be moving forward with her assassination plans and her bloodlust would be calmed. She pushed the monster into its box.

Focused on what was in front of her.

The Hokage summoned Katsuyu and Sakura settled into the formation with the three other members of the guard, forming a barrier as the Hokage meditated inside.

With Sakura’s small reserves she didn’t contribute chakra into the barrier- most of that came from Cheetah and Salamander- but she did act as a stabiliser, as a base for them to form and shape the chakra more easily. It was imperative she keep her chakra level, lest it’s fluctuations upset the balance and cause it to fall or explode.

Time passed and Sakura concentrated on breathing through the rising darkness. Focused her senses to look for anyone approaching the rooftop rather than the sounds of screaming and destruction of her village. In through the nose for four. Hold the breath for seven. Out through the mouth for eight. Again and again and again until her mind settled and her body relaxed.

She'd managed to fall into an almost calm headspace when the Akimichi arrived.

"Hokage-sama!" He called, crashing into position next to the standing woman. "We've learned one of the enemy's powers!"

"I'm listening."

"He's male, looks to be about 25-30 years old. Six piercings on his nose and seven in each ear. His ability is to attract or repel anything his technique targets! Whatever he aims at he can either draw towards himself or push away, that includes any and all kinds of ninjutsu!"

"Repel ninjutsu?" Asked Cheetah.

"Yes! Though there's about a five-second interval between when he finished using it before he can use it again!"

"Just five seconds..."

"Excellent work! This will be tremendous help in reducing our losses." The Hokage said. "I'll alert everyone through Katsuyu!"

"Team Chouza went to back Kakashi-sensei up." The Akimichi said, his voice thick with grief. Sakura froze. "The enemy killed everyone but me."

There was a ringing in her head. The world shrunk to the shake in her hands and the pair's next words. Even the monster had quietened.

"Get to Chouza's location!" The Hokage ordered. "If we get him to the hospital fast enough he can still be saved."

"What?! Then dad's not...?"

"No."

"Thank god! Thank god! What about Kakashi-sensei!?"

The Hokage didn't say anything for a moment. "...Get going, Chouji."

Sakura's chakra fluctuated wildly and she had to lift her hands from the barrier else she'd explode the whole thing. Her body boiled and her chest hollowed and filled with acid.

The world was muffled. Distant. She didn't hear the concerned questions or feel the gentle hand on her shoulder.

Kakashi was dead.

DEAD.

One of hers.

The. MOST. IMPORTANT.

Dead.

Like a gift from the heavens, an orange haired, black and red cloaked figure fell from the sky and landed on the roof. Sakura's eyes drank them in greedily.

Six piercings on his nose. Seven in each ear.

The world rushed back into Perfect. Fucking. Clarity. She shrugged out of Kusanagi's strap and stepped beside the Hokage, storm chakra already cloaking her in dizzying cycles of blue. Her entire body buzzing with the unexpended energy.

She wanted to *hurt*.

Her voice was perfectly calm as she interrupted the conversation between the blonde and the red head.

She wanted to *break*.

"Hokage-sama." She said and they paused. Sakura pushed her chokutō into the Hokage's hands. "I'm calling in my favour. Protect my sword."

She wanted to *kill*.

"W-what?" The Hokage stuttered, hands gripping the chokutō.

Sakura opened the monster's box. It *consumed* her.

Killing intent covered the rooftop and the ANBU around her stumbled and fell to their knees. The Hokage bent over, pale and shaking.

The puppet took a faltering step back.

The monster threw itself forward, fist pulled back to punch as it

jumped at the defiler. He held up a hand and a wall of force hit the monster, throwing it into the air and away from the defiler. He looked bored.

The monster laughed.

Its chakra spun faster and faster and faster and the moment the force stopped its body flickered, landing behind the defiler. It flicked the base of his neck.

A wave of pressurised chakra hit the defiler and his head vaporised with the satisfying sound of shattering bone and squelching innards. One second it was there, one second it was not.

If the intruders could heal any damage to the bodies, then the monster would make sure there were no bodies to heal.

A fist hit the defilers torso. A flick on each limb. The body disappeared, nothing but red splatters on the concrete and the monster breathed. Its hands were twisted into a sign and its awareness expanded painfully. Undertrained sensing forced well past its limits until the monster could read the entire village. Blood dripped out of its nose but the monster ignored it. It compartmentalised away the pain.

There was the vaguest remnants of a signature and it rushed towards it. Ignored the cries of the insects behind it as it sprinted over the rooftops, pushing its body as fast as it would go. It hopped rooftops and balconies and threw itself into the street with reckless abandon.

Crumbled concrete pillars and twisted metal stabilisers twisted formed a nightmarish wasteland of rubble. A tortured skeleton of the destroyed buildings crushed and frozen as it had writhed in silent pain. The sun beat down harshly on a desert of grey, the monotony of destruction only broken up by splatters of vivid red. In the centre of it all was a single, sparking burst of silver.

The monster hit the ground and stumbled, feeling something in its ankle give way as it landed heavily onto its knees. It picked itself up, tightened its shoe until it could no longer twist its foot, and picked its way over the rubble.

Ragged silver hair, bloodied face slack against the ground and slumped shoulders peaking out of a concrete tomb. Thirty two hand signs to twist its chakra system into earth manipulation. Two palms pressed to the ground to lift the rubble off the silver-haired body.

Hands wrapped around the still *-too still not breathing oh go-* ribcage and pulled. The monster stumbled backwards as it dragged the body *-ot a corpse it can'-* out and exposed warped, shattered legs.

Sakura crouched by Kakashi's blood splattered, slack face and pressed trembling fingers to the pulse point on his neck.

Nothing.

-hit fuck please not yo-

Still nothing.

She tore off arm her arm guards and gloves, using teeth and nails and not caring that the fabric ripped and the leather warped. They were discard and a kunai was drawn to cut a slit in the black fabric over Kakashi's neck *-hat does it matter he's dead he can't care if she saw hi-* and bare, pale fingers dug under the fabric to hit clammy skin.

Nothing.

-'s so cold and still and broke-

Still nothing.

The monsters pulled its lips back in a snarl and an inhuman sound tore out of its throat, twisting and bruising its way out of the delicate tissue.

The desecrators would *pay*.

It pried its senses open and the world wavered around the edges as its head gave a furious, painful protest. Blood poured from its nose and splattered out of its mouth with every breath. A shaking hand tore off the intrusive mask and it vomited red before gasping in unobstructed air.

Its senses were gone again but it remembered the feeling of the foul terror to the west. The monster ran. Storm crackled around it.

The shattered landscape gave way to whole buildings gave way to a shattered landscape again. A dead one had its hands around an ant's throat, the ant's back pressed into a wall and a bleeding insect grovelled next to them.

Behind them was the foul thing. A twisted caricature of a smile and bulging eyes hanging over a monstrous face. Madness personified

clinging on a tear between worlds. The trickling echo of insanity pulsing from it and into the edges of the monster's mind. The scent of rot in the air.

The dead one was the anchor. The foul thing had to go first.

The monster flickered and landed on top of the head. Its eyes narrowed as it tasted the signature of the horrific thing. The monster pulled back a fist and twisted its chakra into delicate tenketsu.

"You cannot destroy the King of Hell!" The dead one screamed. The monster punched. The foul thing shook but it did not crack. The monster readied more pressurised chakra, this time twisting and forcing it into the opposite of the foul thing's aura.

"You can destroy my bodies but you can never defeat me! The world will know pain!" The dead one had dropped the ant to continue screaming at it. It must not have combat abilities.

The monster punched. The foul thing shook and a spiderweb of cracks fissured through it.

"That's impossible!"

The monster readied its chakra again and hit a final punch. The foul thing shattered, horrible screams rising from its depths as it twisted and boiled. The pieces shuddered and groaned as they lost their aura. The dead one's world breaking eyes blew wide. He swung and grabbed the ant by the neck, his chakra flaring only for nothing to happen.

The monster flickered behind the dead one and punched. His body exploded. The ant disappeared in a puff of smoke. The monster's feet finished off the remaining chunks of limb.

It tried to force open its senses once more but they refused to cooperate, the world as tiny and dark as it remembered it being as a tiny human. Feverish green eyes swung wildly around its surroundings and landed on beasts that towered over even the tallest of buildings. As it watched one of them barrelled through a construct of wood and glass.

The monster ran.

Over broken buildings and through rubble and past screaming insects. A leap through the air and it launched itself at a mountain-sized,

multi-headed dog creature. A bleeding fist connected with the thing's head and caused an explosion of gore. The monster flickered onto the giant creature's back and watched as the stump where the head had been grew two more.

It blinked.

Pulled back its fist. Ignored the burn of its coils as it forced as much as it could into the points. Slammed it down onto the creature's back.

The dog's spine shattered and bent, the skin becoming a bloody mess below the monster as the creature howled and buckled.

The monster was sweating. There was blood pouring from its nose and mouth. Breaths came in ragged, sputtering gasps. It pulled back a fist and pushed its chakra into its points. Ignoring the agony as it forced the energy out of its body and into the small nodes.

Its fist slammed into the creature's back and the thing roared in pain, its back exploding outwards and the shock travelling down to its organs. It whined and screamed but it did not die. The monster panted and coughed.

The creature was still beneath it.

It pulled back its fist and forced chakra into its points. It ignored the way the body parts the energy left abruptly went numb and stopped working. It ignored the dimming of its vision and the stopping of its lungs. It tried to pull on the almost-filled star upon its forehead, but the energy refused to obey.

It punched.

The creature's insides liquified. The massive dog whined a last whine before it stilled entirely.

The monster's fist exploded outwards in an eruption of bone splinters and red.

It didn't feel the pain.

It didn't feel much of anything.

The creature below it disappeared into smoke and the monster dropped. Its body caught by a screaming insect before it shattered on the ground.

The world stopped.

-

Sakura opened her eyes to blackness. The world devoid of anything but a distant light.

She walked towards it. Had this happened last time she'd died? Was she leaving to go to a new world? To gain new people? A new life?

The idea wasn't a particularly happy one. That was surprising. She hadn't really expected to feel much of anything about her death but there was something hollow and aching when she thought about leaving her world.

The light came into focus as she walked, resolving itself into a lamp hanging from a distant, unseen point. The light flickering occasionally and industrial bulb letting out a quiet hum. Underneath it was a metal table with two stark metal chairs on either side. The edges were scratched and dented and a broken pair of handcuffs swung from a twisted peg.

Sakura slipped into her chair and looked into the face of the man across from her.

"This is unexpected." She said.

"Not for me." Tristan replied. "I've been here the whole time. Watching." He gestured to the side and a screen came into focus.

"Does this mean we're two individual souls?" Sakura asked. "I'd always considered us the same person in a different body."

"That's not true, there's always been a distinction between Tristan and Sakura, minor as it was." He replied. "Though we are essentially the same at the core, and sharing our memories blurs the lines to where it hardly matters."

Sakura frowned. "I do experience a wider range of emotions than you ever did, though I had attributed that to puberty."

"I think there's more to it than that." Tristan said, slowly twisting the golden ring on his finger. "I have come to the realisation that we were depressed."

"We were?"

“We certainly weren’t happy. The only drive we had was looking forward to the next kill. When the disease came we were glad to die.”

“I suppose. Am I depressed? I did just commit suicide by chakra exhaustion.” Sakura said matter of factly. Tristan chuckled.

“You are young, aren’t you? Even with my experiences guiding you there are things that you miss.” His tone was mirthful. “No. You are not depressed, you killed yourself in an act of grief. You’re actually far happier than I can ever remember being.”

“We didn’t go this far over Sarah.” Sakura whispered. Tristan’s face became solemn.

“No, we didn’t.” He said. “And we loved her. She was our firstborn. *Truly* one of ours, but we weren’t one of hers.”

“I don’t understand.”

“My world was different. People like us were locked up and reviled by the masses, and for good reason.” He leaned forward, a serious expression on his face. “We hid ourselves every second of the day, the only people who ever saw our true face were those we killed. Have you ever hid yourself from your Hatake?”

“I certainly didn’t advertise what I was.” Sakura said.

“That is true, especially in the beginning, when you were learning just how accepting this world was of its darker aspects. But you also have never lied about your motivations. You were always completely honest with the man, even if you didn’t share anything.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice to punctuate his words. “And he has never, not even *once*, rejected that part of you. Even when you’ve shown outright bloodlust the man has smiled fondly and encouraged you.”

“That is true.” She whispered, a small smile twitching the corners of her lips.

“I loved my wife and I loved my kids and I loved my friends but they did not love me.” Tristan said, leaning back in his chair as the lines on his face suddenly became more prominent. The greys stood out in his hair. “The man they loved was a hollow image, little more than a projection. I have no doubt that if they had ever met the real me they’d have discarded me in an instant.”

“They were one of yours, but you were never one of theirs.” Sakura nodded, understanding lighting her features.

“Indeed.”

“Do you know what happens now?” She asked and he shook his head.

“When I arrived here the screen just began showing your life.” He said with a small frown. “Maybe there is no third life for us?”

“Purgatory?” She eyed the blackness around them.

“I could hardly see us ascending to heaven, or the pure lands as your world calls it.”

“But we’re not going to hell?”

“We haven’t yet.”

“This is under the assumption that those places exist.”

“It doesn’t particularly matter. Either we do or we don’t.” Tristan shrugged, lounging backwards in his chair. He opened his mouth to say something else but paused as a beam of light enveloped Sakura.

“What the fuck?” She said, staring down at her glowing hands.

“You’re going back.” Tristan whispered and his brow furrowed. “I feel like I should be able to...”

Sakura went weightless, floating in the air, and he reached over the table; a single, ring bearing finger landing on the point between her collarbones. The air burned and the world disappeared in a flash of light.

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Sakura opened her eyes.

She had a disconcerting feeling like something was missing, even as a star between her collarbones caught her attention.

“Sakura!” A brown head hovered worriedly above her. “Are you alright?”

“Genma?” Sakura said, blinking and taking in the destruction around her. It looked like Konoha had been levelled by a herd of giant cattle.

"I'm... not dead?" She looked at the hand she distinctly remembered exploding. It was whole, not even any scars to indicate what had happened. In fact, it was like her body had reverted to how it was just before the battle. No aches or pains indicative of exertion and her chakra levels full.

"Let me explain..." Started a Katsuyu next to her.

And that was how Sakura heard the story of the female Pein summoning a herd of giant summons to rampage through Konoha, stampeding over the village as the Hokage poured all of her chakra into protecting its citizens. The Uzumaki appearing and fighting the remaining three Peins, being captured by a summon from the female Pein and turning into a Bijuu when the female Hyuuga sacrificed herself to save him.

Apparently then Pein made a moon???

And then the Uzumaki made a miraculous return to his normal self, beat up the Pein's and yelled a very anorexic man into submission, causing him to sacrifice his life to bring back all the people he killed, completely avoiding answering for the massive amounts of property damage and emotional trauma.

It was all very nice and touching but Sakura could only play the conversation with Tristan over and over in her mind.

"Kakashi?" She asked, voice just above a whisper.

"Perfectly well." The summon replied and Sakura couldn't help it.

She cried. She gave into her age and the hormones and she clung to Genma and cried out all the stress and the grief. The man held her to his chest and stroked her hair through it, humming quietly in her ear as her sobs slowly wound down to the occasional hiccup. She rubbed her face with the back of a hand.

"Fucking Hokage better have my sword." She muttered, pushing herself away from Shiranui as he laughed at her.

"Why would the Hokage have your sword?" He asked incredulously.

"I gave it to her. Told her to keep it safe." Sakura sniffed, pushing herself to standing and cracking the joints in her back. "Cashed in a favour for it or everything."

“You traded a favour from the Hokage for a sword?!” Shiranui asked, sounding genuinely offended at the idea.

“That sword is my baby. I would trade a thousand favours just to keep it safe.” Sakura said defensively.

“Maa, no need to go that far, Sakura.” A voice drawled from beside her and her face split into a grin as she twisted to regard the whole, not at all dead man. He wasn’t looking at her. Instead he was having a tense stare-off with Shiranui that she really didn’t understand. Sakura stood between the two as they had an entire conversation she wasn’t privy to in a series of twitches and glares, her lips pursed and brow furrowed. After a few seconds the senbon-chewing man nodded and wandered off, mumbling something about finding Namiashi. She watched after him go before blinking and deciding to just ignore whatever happened, instead twisting back to face Hatake.

“Kakashi!” She greeted excitedly and then her eyes dropped to the beautiful blue and white sword in his hand. Her smile widened. “Kusanagi!” She launched forwards, intending to latch onto the man and her wonderful chokutō in one fell swoop, but he turned at the last second and she ended up balanced on one of his hips, legs wrapped around his waist and arms clutching his incredible, moving ribcage with the beautiful heartbeat underneath. Though the hand holding Kusanagi ended up on the side she wasn’t on.

“I see how it is. My own student more excited to see a piece of metal than me.” He said, voice thick with mock offence, as his free hand landed atop her head.

“You won’t be seeing much more of anything if you call my baby just a ‘piece of metal’ again, Hatake.” She growled and clambered over him to reach for her chokutō. He just eye-smiled down at her and used the hand on her head to keep her in place, his other hand lifting Kusanagi out of her reach.

“Do you have a jacket? I know the village was destroyed but it’s probably still bad form to walk around in your ANBU kit and no mask.” He said and she paused, leaning off him a bit to look down at herself.

Her gloves and arm guards had been dumped at some point, along with her mask, and the rest of what she was wearing had strips melted out of them. A fair few of the ceramic plates in her flak jacket had actually exploded outwards.

“Ah.” She pressed her face into his shoulder and just clutched for a short moment because he’d been dead and she’d had a psychotic break and she’d been so sure that she’d been doomed to sit in a metal chair and watch other people live forever but now *they were alive*.

The sentiment was shared, if the way Kakashi’s hand twisted a little too tightly into her hair and his nose pressed into the top of her head and inhaled a little shakily.

But then his grip was loosening and she was slipping back to the ground, rummaging through the inner pockets on her ANBU flak jacket to pull out a scroll. She unrolled it on a convenient hunk of rubble and poofed the clothes inside into reality. She considered the flak jacket for a moment before simply cutting it off with a kunai. The tank top was intact enough that she just left it but the pants were unsalvageable so she peeled them off and threw a soft grey sweater dress (It was a part of her ‘cold weather pyjamas’ emergency kit, being caught with nothing but what was physically on your person wasn’t never excuse to sleep uncomfortably.) over the top of everything.

The rest of the clothes resealed, weapons pouches strapped back on and scroll tucked away she turned back to Hatake. He was staring at her with a complicated expression, seemingly lost in thought as she blinked up at him.

“...Kashi?” She asked and he snapped back to reality, tossing her her chokutō and taking long strides to head in the direction of the village outskirts.

“Come on.” He said and she hurried to catch up to him, slinging Kusanagi over her shoulder. “Naruto should be getting back soon. Iruka went to collect him.”

“I heard that Pein made a moon to trap the nine-tails inside!” She said as she walked next to him, her face furrowed in thought and eyes wide with excitement. “Does that mean that the real moon was made by someone? Is there a bijuu trapped inside of it? Are there secretly ten tailed-beasts and the tenth one is just stuck in the sky?”

Hatake glanced at her, a complicated expression crossed his face and he abruptly looked away again. “Hopefully we’ll never find out.”

Sakura didn’t know what that was about but in deference to the man literally dying earlier she ignored it. After all, he was ignoring how her forefinger kept finding the pulse point on his wrist.

Five Kages and a Traitor Walk into a Bar

Chapter Summary

Sakura definitely doesn't flirt at all, pisses off the Raikage and questions how the fuck their enemy being Uchiha fucking Madara wasn't something anyone thought to mention to her before now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sakura stared at the rhombus sitting between her collarbones.

It was, without a doubt, a completed strength of a hundred seal. It was also, without a doubt, where Tristan had touched her as she'd been brought back to life.

She lifted her hands in the sign to release the seal. The rhombus warmed and seemed to buzz angrily, refusing to release.

“Sorry.” She mumbled and it immediately settled back down. Sakura pondered the fact that a seemingly sentient, massive source of chakra was living between her collarbones for a moment before deciding just to roll with it.

Most of her clothing had high necklines, anyway.

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“There’s so much I want to talk about with Tsunade-baa-chan.” The Uzumaki said.

“She’ll be fine.” Sakura said, running a hand through her hair and leaning further back against the pile of wood. Once the invasion had ended they’d been drafted into the rebuilding effort. Every muscle in her body was aching from the work and she hadn’t had any much needed down time to think. At the very least she wasn’t one of the people being charged with their actions during the invasion, according to what she could pull out of Cheetah the Hokage had grumbled about ‘the favour being worth more than that’ and subsequently pardoned Sakura’s actions publicly enough that the council couldn’t overrule the decision, even if she was now permanently removed from the guard routine.

Sakura would miss the steady influx of firsthand information about the comings and goings of the village but she wouldn't miss the long hours of doing nothing and surprising lack of murder.

"It's been a super long time, Naruto! Sakura!" An old man yelled at them, a black haired kid next to him. Sakura did not recognise these people, but clearly they recognised her so she acted pleasantly surprised.

"I never thought I'd get another meeting with a hero, Naruto-nii-chan!" The kid said.

"Inari! Tazuna!" The Uzumaki cried, proving that they weren't just weirdo's trying rub off on their fame. "Ah man! Inari you shot up! And Tazuna you... got older."

"Bah!"

"I'm a carpenter now, too. We're both here to work on official Konoha projects. I wanted to say hi to you guys before we got started." The kid said and smiled at her. "You sure got pretty, Sakura-nee-chan."

"Haha! I was always pretty!" She smiled, not allowing how lost she was with the conversation to show.

"I'm so sorry we let Gatou get away with what he did, thanks to you Wave country is prospering like never before." The old man said, bowing and making the kid do the same. The pieces clicked into place.

No wonder she didn't recognise them or know what the fuck they were talking about, Wave was the weeks she spent in a migraine induced haze.

"We're here to return the favour!" The kid said determinedly.

Sakura focused on smiling and nodding politely for the rest of the conversation. She only really tuned back in to her surroundings enough to be frustratingly hyper aware of Hatake's arrival and then fully when she heard the footsteps of a giant dog approaching.

"Ah! There you are!" The Inuzuka said, his giant dog skidding to a halt next to them.

"Kiba?"

"Okay, don't freak out when you hear this, but Tsunade-sama's been

replaced as Hokage!”

Sakura’s brows furrowed. Her eyes flickered to a Hatake that was trying to hide his surprise. He wasn’t chosen?

“They chose some guy named Danzō as the Rokudaime! I don’t know everything but apparently he’s some behind the scenes power player.”

“Oh fuck.” She breathed.

“Yeah but that’s not the half of it! The Rokudaime just authorised the elimination of the ‘rogue ninja’ Sasuke!”

“What the hell?!” Uzumaki exclaimed. Sakura’s mind was whirling.

“They wouldn’t wait for Tsunade-sama to recover, and it does make sense. Sasuke is a rogue ninja. Any other village would’ve had him killed a long time ago. The one reason he’s been left alone was due to Tsunade’s benevolence.” Hatake said, trying to calm the rapidly reddening Uzumaki, though one or two worried looking glances were shot her way.

“They can’t kill Sasuke! I’m going to go talk to him and make him change his mind!” The Uzumaki yelled, taking a step in the direction of the village centre.

Sakura registered Hatake stepping forward to talk him down and tuned out the rest of the conversation. She had to think.

Shimura was hokage. Sakura had a few options. The easiest would be to simply let the man be Hokage.

The problem with that was that he would bring the village to ruin. Sakura would likely be forced into extremely high risk, low reward jobs. People like Hatake would be forced back into ANBU service. The country would end up going to war within half a year. People she cared about would die and her life would turn to shit.

She could try to destroy him politically, all she would have to do is distribute the files she had collected for Tsunade. Doing so, however, would create a large amount of dissent in the village, weaken their defences during such a vulnerable period and lead to chaos. Dragging out the man’s dirty laundry would be dragging out the village’s dirty laundry. There was a *reason* Tsunade had asked her to simply assassinate the man.

Her third option was to carry out the orders of the Hokage and ensure the man was killed.

She looked up, Uzumaki and Inuzuka were gone. Only Hatake remained, staring at her with the frustratingly complicated expression he'd been watching her with since they'd died.

"Just hypothetically." She started. "What would happen if Shimura Danzō were to suddenly die?"

To the man's credit, he didn't freak out or try to talk her down, he simply seriously considered the question. "Likely, not much. He's only just been given the position and he hasn't gained the jōnin leadership vote, so he's not implanted into the village as the Hokage yet. Someone else would simply step up as the Rokudaime." He looked seriously down at her. "I do not recommend the Hokage suddenly dying."

Sakura smiled, just a small upturn of her lips. "If I do anything, it'll be according to the orders of Tsunade-sama before the invasion."

Hatake's eyes widened and Sakura grinned cheerfully. "I'm afraid I've got a lot of work to do to help with the reconstruction, so I might not be around for a few days, Kashi." She patted his arm as she passed and disappeared, heading for Tsunade's tent with her full amount of stealth.

Fifteen minutes and a needle full of fresh blood later, Sakura was headed for the archives.

(Thank god for shinobi and their paranoia, building their archives right into the rock so that they would stay safe through even the village being levelled.)

The blood was swiped on a blank wall, far in the back of the records rooms and hidden behind a series of bookcases. A pulse of Tsunade's chakra and Sakura was sliding through a narrow passage and into a small room with five scrolls on a table in its centre.

Technically, she wasn't supposed to know this existed, but Sakura spent a *lot* of time in Archives and when the Hokage appears only to disappear into a room filled with old import orders, you get curious and follow the Hokage.

She couldn't risk that one of Shimura's had followed the Hokage, too. Sakura slipped the scrolls into her pack and disappeared.

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Sakura was crouched behind the tent, hearing focused on the conversation happening within and mind whirling.

There was going to be a five Kage summit. If Shimura Danzō made it to the summit, he would either cement his position as Hokage or mess up entirely and start a war.

He could not be allowed into that summit.

Fortunately, the summit provided an excellent opportunity to kill the old bastard without getting tried for treason, she would just be adapting Tsunade's plan a little. It would be easy enough to kill the man on the road, where *anyone* could have done it.

-

The road to the summit was clear, with a convenient pack of Forest country ANBU sitting in ambush just up ahead.

Sakura perched in the trees, her chakra signature down to nothing and her transparency jutsu almost perfect. She wore a fresh set of an ANBU-level, scent dampening uniform, gifted courtesy of the Hokage for this very purpose. She breathed slowly, letting herself fall into the rhythm of nature as she waited.

She became a part of the bush. Nothing anyone would notice.

The minutes passed. Three figures rounded the bend.

As they passed their position Sakura moved like a creeping vine, completely silent. Almost completely still. Lowering her body temperature to that of the air. She made no indication of her presence as she approached the centre man and she gave them no reason to notice her as she positioned Kusanagi behind his head. On the outside she was entirely still but underneath her false calm her heart beat wildly in her chest, the wonderful rush of adrenaline filling her and pulling her mouth into an uncontrolled grin.

An involuntary burst of killing intent and the guards either side of Shimura whipped around, weapons drawn. Shimura moved but he was old. No matter how skilled, nothing could be done to overcome stiff joints. Her chokutō buried itself through his skull. Lightning wrapped itself down the blade, cauterising the wound and ensuring the old man was dead.

She pulled her blade out with a satisfying *shluck*.

The guards launched at her. The ginger one tried... something that felt like a genjutsu entering her system but she simply directed her own chakra away from the foreign energy and the technique quickly failed. He startled badly, his grip on his tantō becoming too tight and meaning that it jarred and flew out of his hands when Sakura met it with the flat of her chokutō. The next moment her lightning covered blade was though the underside of his chin.

She twisted to meet the taijutsu attack of the other guard, blocking a kick with a weakly chakra enhanced punch- the most she could with little to no time- and sending his leg flying. He lifted a hand as he twisted and sent a rapidly darkening cloud of bugs in her direction. Sakura mentally cursed, held her breath and wreathed her body in storm, melting through the insects. She jumped through the cloud, coming face to face with a shocked Aburame as she buried her chokutō in his chest.

With him dead most of the bugs dispersed but a few particularly stubborn ones clung to her clothing, just small enough to escape the strips of storm and she grimaced. They weren't actively attacking her without the Aburame to direct them but it was gross. She was covered in bugs and didn't have enough chakra to cover herself in enough storm to melt all of them.

She felt purple stripes unravel from the seal on her collarbones and the subsequent influx of chakra thickened the storm around her for a moment, melting the last of the stubborn things before the energy sunk back into the seal. It was covered by her scent masking uniform but Sakura blinked down at the seal all the same.

It felt distinctly smug.

"Thanks, even if you are an asshole." She muttered and then, in a valiant effort to ignore how fucking weird the whole situation was, she focused on dealing with the bodies. Sakura strode over to Shimura's corpse, curious as to what he had meant by "the problems with my right eye and arm."

Her fingers caught on the bandages and pulled them back to the man's forehead. She forced the lid open.

Now *that* was a temptation.

A Sharingan. Just sitting there. That no one knew about.

That Sakura wouldn't be able to explain the sudden appearance of, would cause more problems than it would solve and that she didn't have the tools on her to store for later use. Not to mention with her reserves she would probably just open her eye once and find herself in the hospital. She scowled.

If she couldn't take it then she certainly wasn't letting any random have it.

A storm laced kunai stabbed into the socket and the billion-ryo eye melted.

She pulled out the man's arm and immediately wished she hadn't. It was fascinating in a truly disgusting sort of way. She couldn't stop staring at the grotesque, half formed face and embed Sharingans.

She pressed her lips white, resisted the urge to puke and started stabbing.

Five minutes later and three figures walked only slightly clumsily down the road. The only indication that anything was off was their glassy eyes, the missing tantō and the singed holes in their body.

A group of forest ANBU launched at them and Sakura let their attacks hit for a while, let the bodies be mauled by the men until their cause of death wasn't immediately obvious. Then, she stopped feeding the strings and let them fall like puppets they were. It wouldn't fool an Inuzuka but would hopefully hamper the investigation enough she could dodge any suspicion.

Before the bodies had hit the ground she was already moving, tantō sliding through the flesh of the Forest-nin. She went through the first few like butter. The pathetic ninjas unable to react to a mostly invisible opponent slashing through them.

The others seemed a little smarter. An earth jutsu smashed through her approximate position and she leapt, setting a single foot on the massive boulder only for it to immediately start trying to suck her in. A burst of pressurised chakra cracked it away from her and she rode the momentum into the trees, landing on a woman's back and slicing through her jugular.

She dug a hand into the dying women's weapons pack and jumped, twisting over a fire sickle and throwing a stolen kunai into a man's throat. She fell through the air to land on a nearby tree trunk, stuck with chakra and raced back up to leap towards a pair of enemy-nins.

Her tantō swiped through one's neck and the other aimed a kick at her general direction. She ducked under it and nicked the guy's femoral artery, adding another swipe up his stomach for good measure.

She went to go for the next one but they were already bounding through the trees, one of the ANBU having clearly given the order for retreat. Sakura took a moment to just pant through her smile and turned back to the road, adding little bit of burning here and punching a log there. Just generally doing her best to make the battle as confusing to follow as possible.

She grabbed the bloody lump that was the Hokage for a few short hours and tossed him in the general direction of Konoha. He went a lot farther than she would have managed before training with Gai but nothing close to what the Hokage could accomplish. Sometime she wondered if it would be worth it to go through the years of medical training to achieve the Hokage's insane strength, rather than just her ability to smash things, but then Sakura would remember that part of that medical training included helping sick and injured people and any interest in the subject would sour.

After rifling through the bags of one of Shimura's guards- finding and setting off the emergency beacon, something that would bring jōnin crashing down on the point within a half hour- she carried the guard into the trees, spreading his blood around and positioning his dead body in the branch tops.

The very edge of her hearing had picked up the sound of running footsteps so she figured that would do and made a beeline for a nearby river, washing the enemies' blood off and restoring her gear to scent neutrality.

She made it back to the village and positioned herself at Tsunade's bedside before anyone had noticed her absence. The guards watching the woman would report her having not being there if anyone asked, but Sakura wasn't going to give anyone a reason to.

For now, she had some plans to create.

Her level of attachment towards Hatake was both surprising for Sakura and not. She'd known, of course, that she was attached to him but she hadn't realised just how central he was to her life until he was gone. Looking back at her feelings for him in the harsh light of a post-death day it was perfectly clear to Sakura that she'd do anything to keep him. Forever.

Unfortunately that would be easier said than done.

Tristan had experienced a similar feeling, though in his memories it was a little less extreme, towards one of his close friends and, at the time, roommates. They'd met and become fast friends in law school and years later Tristan had watched her as she'd rebuffed another man who wouldn't take her clear disinterest for an answer. She'd spent a minute giving the guy straightforward 'no's before she'd evidently reached the end of her patience, turned to him, and with just a few sentences had torn the guy's ego asunder. Tristan had been looking for a wife- both to stay under the radar of a society that expected marriage and kids by their mid thirties and because the idea of having children, creatures that were made from him were truly *his* in every sense of the word, appealed greatly- and he'd decided then and there that he'd spend the rest of his life with that wonderful woman. That she'd been one of the most independent and highly moral women he'd ever met- aiming to become a family lawyer so she could genuinely help abused kids instead of using her fantastic marks to gain a high paying job at in a less morally orientated field- hadn't deterred him in the slightest. Instead he'd buried everything about his personality that could be considered unsavoury behind layers of masks and followed an involved and careful seduction process. They'd been dating within a year, married within two.

Unfortunately, Sakura couldn't just marry Hatake.

Not only were the cultures completely different, marriage in the shinobi world seen more as a political move than a common occurrence and relationships in general usually not monogamous, but following Tristan's footsteps and fitting herself into a box in order to seduce Hatake would ultimately be damaging the relationship she wanted to protect. The conversation with Tristan rang in her ears and Sakura knew if she did anything to keep the man but not the transparency than that would be as good as losing the relationship all together.

Suddenly, without the option to twist herself to fit, making any kind of romantic pursuit towards Hatake or even shaking up the status quo at all became a risk. A giant, terrifying risk.

No. She wouldn't, *she couldn't*, risk losing him. Instead she'd just be the best possible friend he could ever need and try and gently encourage a level of emotional codependence between them. Sakura couldn't quite convince herself that she wouldn't slowly and painfully murder anyone that he showed interest in but everyone had their

flaws.

For Konoha's sake she hoped the rumours about the man's post-ANBU dry spell held true.

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When the older version of the Nara entered the tent Sakura used surprise to cover a thick layer of trepidation.

"Shikaku-san. What are you doing here?" She asked, all wide eyed and innocent like. He did not have his son's mindset of assuming everything she did and said was a lie to lure them into a false sense of security before she killed them in their sleep, so the older Nara believed her act.

"You have a mission." The older version said, face grim. "Shimura Danzō is dead, Hatake Kakashi has been appointed the Rokudaime Hokage in his stead." Sakura's eyebrows rose as the man talked. "Kakashi has unfortunately decided to go on an unsanctioned trip with Yamato and Uzumaki Naruto. Since we're technically not allowed the move shinobi through the borders, you're to stealthily track them down and head to the Hokage summit ASAP." He handed her the Hokage hat.

"Wouldn't this be violating my ban from Hokage guard duty?"

"That ban was put in place after you proved you'd put others above Tsunade-sama's safety." He looked distinctly unimpressed. "Somehow I don't think that will be an issue in this instance."

"Understood, I'll leave immediately." Sakura stood with a sheepish smile and headed to the corner where her pack was sitting. Nara sighed quietly and made to leave but she caught and before he could hurry off and pushed the pack into his hands. "Don't let anyone else read these." Her voice was deadly serious and she saw curiosity burst to life in his eyes. "Shikaku-san." She nodded to the man and headed for the outskirts of the village.

She begun speeding through the summoning hand signs but paused at the sound of tiny paws hitting the earth.

"That won't be necessary." A familiar, tired sounding dog said as it appeared next to her.

"Pakkun! You're a lifesaver!" She said, one hand digging through her

weapons pouch to the scroll with the caterpillars for her summons and a bag of dog treats sealed inside. "My summons always insist on double the caterpillars when we go anywhere cold." The dog treats appeared and she held one out for the pug.

"Kakashi thought something like this might happen, so he left me behind to bring you to him." The pug said between chews, tail wagging. Sakura packed her weapons pouch back up.

"I'll follow your lead then, Pakkun." She said and the pug nodded, launching up into the branches.

The trip was silent and fast, the pair pushing quickly through Fire country and into the land of Frost. It was there that Pakkun paused.

"I smell them up ahead, but they're with a group of six others." Pakkun said.

"Okay, hold on a moment." She closed her eyes and focused on her hearing, stretching it to the very edges of her range. She could hear a group talking, but there were no sounds of fighting. She opened her eyes again to see the pug looking curiously at her. "It sounds like they're just talking, so we'll wait for them to finish and split up on their own again."

"That's some good hearing, girly." Pakkun said and Sakura beamed.

"Thank you, it's a by product of my summons and I've trained it a lot."

They didn't have to wait long, they must have already been at the end of the conversation because the pug reported that the six signatures abruptly sped away.

Sakura followed Pakkun through the trees and came upon the three of them, Uzumaki kneeling in the snow and looking like he'd had the shit kicked out of him. Sakura raised an eyebrow and turned to look at a very downcast looking Hatake.

"I was hoping you wouldn't show up." He groaned and Sakura smiled.

"Cheer up, Sensei! You're the Hokage now!" She chirped and placed the ridiculous hat on his head. His shoulders slumped even further. The Uzumaki straightened.

"Wait what?! What happened to that Danzō guy?" He asked.

“Ah, it seems he was ambushed by a team of Forest country ANBU on his way to the Hokage summit. He did not survive the attack.” She said. Uzumaki looked conflicted between joy and guilt at feeling joy over a person’s death. Sakura rummaged in her pack to pull out another dog treat and handed it to the pug, his tiny tail wagging. “Pakkun was kind enough to lead me here, since we technically aren’t allowed to move shinobi between the borders but someone needed to let Kakashi-sensei know he was Hokage and had to show up at the summit.”

“You couldn’t have just been saying hi or something, couldn’t you.” The man whined, his lone eye looking pinched.

“How many guards can the Hokage take?” Tiger interjected and Sakura grimaced.

“A maximum of two.”

“Sakura and I will head to the summit, Yamato, you will escort Naruto back to fire country.” Hatake said and Tiger nodded. The Uzumaki looked mulish.

“Why aren’t I going with you?” He said, both Tiger and Hatake looked vaguely horrified at the idea of a the Uzumaki at a political talk. Sakura calmly smiled at him.

“Sorry, Naruto but it’s not your thing anyway.” She said. “Think hours of crotchety old men arguing over taxes.” The Uzumaki suddenly seemed very keen to go with Tiger. Hatake had the air of a man walking towards the gallows.

-

The five Kage summit was set in a set of giant, mouth-like mountains. They loomed ominously over the white countryside, massive beasts poised to devour the very earth itself.

Hatake sent her a despairing look. “Could you not have worn something a little more appropriate for the weather?”

Sakura looked down at the yellow sundress- a henge hiding the purple rhombus between her collarbones, it was one of her few pieces of clothing with a low neckline- and back at Hatake with a frown. “It’s one of the few things that survived the invasion and I thought it looked nice.” She turned wide, glassy eyes and a teasing pout on the man. “Do you not think it looks nice?”

Fuck, shit, was she flirting? Her entire game plan was to *not* rock the boat. Sakura hoped dearly that her face didn't convey any of her growing panic.

His eyes flitted over her and his expression tightened as he sighed, turning back to looking where they were going. "It looks very nice, but normal people would freeze to death if they wore that."

"I have the chakra control to keep everything warm." Sakura said with a shrug firmly ignoring any sparks of happiness at the compliment. The colour on her cheekbones was clearly because of said chakra use. She didn't even notice how Hatake's hair looked particularly striking flecked with delicate flakes of snow and the cloak he was wearing emphasised the broadness of his shoulders. "I don't see why I should pretend otherwise."

Okay so maybe she did but wanting to climb the man like a tree wasn't exactly a new experience for her and so to pretending she didn't really shouldn't be this difficult. Hatake was one of the few people she'd experienced sustained attraction towards and had spent her younger years pretending otherwise knowing she was far too young and firmly not wanting to make their relationship awkward. She'd decided not to upset the status quo and *absolutely* wasn't about to risk another psychotic episode just because of some hormones.

Hatake mumbled something about Sakura 'staying a genin' that was too garbled for her to catch, even with her enhanced hearing, before they approached the bridge to the Summit area and they both quietened.

A very serious looking man approached them.

"I am the commander in chief of the Iron country, Mifune." He greeted.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Hatake said, his tone impressively self assured and leader-like. "I am Hatake Kakashi, the Hokage." The serious man nodded and begun walking towards the doors.

"Please follow me, we have hot tea inside." He said, though he threw Sakura a bewildered look. She grinned.

The inside of the building was overly cavernous, theoretically any chance that the place would stay even slightly warm destroyed by the sheer height of the rooms yet the building was somehow comfortably lukewarm. They were led to an amphitheatre-esque room with a

central table with seats for the five Kages and an upper row of seating for the guards. Sakura settled into her spot above the Fire seat, waved at the Suna siblings and winked at a particularly nervous looking Kiri teen. Her grin widened when the kid blushed and began to visibly panic, only to be clapped on the back and laughed at by the second, giant of a guard.

“Remove your hats.” The serious looking man said and the Kages set the ridiculous looking hats on the tables. “As per Raikage-sama’s request, the five Kages are gathered here today. I, Mifune, will act as moderator. I hereby call this summit of the five Kages to order.”

“I’ll start. Everyone listen up.” Said the Kazekage, a surprising amount of steel in the reportedly easygoing kid’s voice. Though she supposed it wasn’t that surprising considering last time she’d seen the kid he’d been crowing about feeding the voices in his head blood.

“The five Kages have certainly changed over the years.” The Tsuchikage interrupted, his voice the perfect timber of crotchety old man. “You’re certainly something special to have earned your title at such a young age, Kazekage-dono. It reflects well on your father and how he must have raised you, although it seems he forgot to teach you manners.”

“I suppose. I am the Kazekage, am I not?”

“Guahahaha! What an impertinent kid!”

Tsuchikage-sama please don’t interrupt.” Said the Mizukage.
“Continue, Kazekage-sama.”

“I am a former jinchūriki. Akatsuki extracted the bijuu from my body and nearly killed me as a result. Therefore, I consider Akatsuki the most dangerous organisation in existence today. I’ve sought the cooperation of all five Kages but have been ignored with the exception of the previous Hokage. And now, with so many Bijuu’s in their hands, it’s too late.”

“Hmph. Who would want to tell the hidden villages of the five great countries that their jinchūriki have been abducted!” Crotchety old man whined. “It’s shameful! It’s only natural to keep your attempts to recover them a secret! Who asks another nation for help recovering their own stolen weapon?”

Ironically, the only jinchūriki who *wasn’t* dead after being captured by Akatsuki, even if they still lost the bijuu.

“Protecting status and honour. A foolish way of thinking from a time that has passed.”

“Even if they’ve stolen the Bijuu there’s still no immediate threat. It takes skill, knowledge and, above all, time to be able to control them.” Said the only female Kage.

“One needs to grow with the beast, find common ground and harmonise. Even then, fully controlling them is no small feat. Is it, Kazekage-dono?” Crotchety old man said, apparently mad that the Suna kid was making valid points and in response taking petty shots at his past as more than mildly insane.

“There have only been a few people in history able to fully control a bijuu.” Hatake interrupted. “Notably these included Uchiha Madara and the Shodai Hokage Harashima. Unfortu-”

A roar of ozone-laden chakra filled the room and a massive fist crashed on the table. Sakura didn’t twitch from her seat until she saw all of the other guards leap down between the Kages, weapons drawn.

“Enough of this jibber-jabber!” The Raikage roared as his guards protected him from a swarm of attackers, looking to defend their own Kages. Sakura belatedly jumped over the railing and landed next to Hatake, looking bemusedly at the mess.

“Shouldn’t you be more invested in protected me?” He drawled quietly.

“From him?” She asked with a smile. “Aside from the fact that he looks like he’d snap both of us in half with a finger.” She said and his head tilted in reluctant agreement. “He’s just like Naruto and, you know, getting his need to be loud and distracting once an hour out of his system.” He didn’t laugh but Hatake’s eye became a little less painfully creased and his shoulders relaxed slightly. “Will Naruto be that big when he’s Hokage?” His hands twitched violently.

“This is a forum for conversation. All parties will observe the protocol.” The serious one said.

“Stand down, Kankurou, Temari.” Said the Kazekage.

“Ao, Chōjirō, its alright.” Said the woman.

Hatake waved a hand at her and she smiled. “Of course, Hokage-sama.” She whispered, sounding entirely serious unless you knew her

well in which case it came across as teasing, as she jumped back up and into the stands. She ignored the flat look he sent after her.

“Konoha! Iwa! Suna! Kiri! Akastuki is composed of rogue ninja from your villages!” The giant man yelled. “And that’s just the start! I’ve learnt that the previous Kages, plus some of you, have been making use of Akatsuki.”

“Using Akastuki?”

“I don’t trust any of you! I didn’t even want to talk to you people! The only reason I requested we hold a summit was to determine once and for all where your loyalties lie!”

“What do you mean, we’ve used Akastuki?”

“Look at you! The Kazekage and you don’t even know anything! Go back to the village and ask those old relics! They’ll tell you that Suna used Akatsuki during wartime!”

“These days the great nations have all achieved an equal level of peace. We’ve gone from expanding our arms to reducing them. As relations improve and the threat of war grows smaller, a large military becomes a drain on the budget. Of course there’s risk involved, as well. If war breaks out then they’re saddled with nothing but inexperienced shinobi to defend them. Then the war’s good as lost.”

“And the only option for mitigating that risk is mercenary groups with no loyalties. In other words, Akatsuki.”

“Every village has mistakes in their past.” Hatake interrupted. “Right now, what we need to do is move on from these mistakes and focus on the future, for the sake of the next generation. As I was saying earlier, it’s highly likely that Akatsuki’s leader is Uchiha Madara.”

The Kages froze. Sakura’s brows shot up. What had happened when she was in the hospital to lead to that conclusion? Also, how the hell did she not know about it?

“Hasn’t he been dead for years?” The crotchety old man asked nervously.

“I fought him myself. It’s almost entirely certain.”

“Talk about a living, breathing monster.”

“Speaking from our position as a neutral country, I feel Akatsuki’s leader has studied the lessons of the past well. He has observed exactly how comfortable each nation is with trusting the others, and has exploited this knowledge to build his power. At this rate he’ll even get to the Iron country.

“However, all clouds have a silver lining, it is unheard of for all five kages to be in agreement on any issue. I propose that until Akatsuki is completely eliminated, the five great hidden village’s, for the first time in history create a single joint military force.”

“A joint force?!”

“I agree, we must work together to defeat Akatsuki.” Hatake said.

“Command shou-

“HELLO!” A nightmare plant shot out of the middle of the room, Sakura was already moving, landing on the desk before Hatake with Kusanagi drawn and rippling electric blue. She recognised the thing from the information Kabuto had given them but... it was only half of it?

That was worrying.

She frowned, a niggling feeling was building in her chakra system.

“They just keep coming, who’re you?!”

“Akatsuki.” Hatake confirmed.

“Uchiha Sasuke’s infiltrated your village, why don’t you try to find him before he escapes, hmmm?” The thing said. “How about we all go find Sasuke? C’mon!”

“What?!”

Sakura shifted uneasily, looking back at a grim faced Hatake. The Raikage moved, little more than a blur as he grabbed the Akastuki by the neck.

“WHERE IS UCHIHA SASUKE?! ANSWER ME!”

The niggling sensation in Sakura’s chakra system was growing larger, five little points sucking away at her energy. She forced her chakra way from them, circulating her system out of those areas for a moment. When the chakra returned, the points were gone.

“ANSWER ME NOW OR YOU WILL PAY THE PRICE!”

“Fine I guess I can give you a hint.”

The Raikage snapped the Akatsuki’s neck. “Shii, get to work!”

“There was no need to kill him! We could have interrogated him and gained valuable information about Akatsuki!”

“Akasuki members don’t reveal anything about their organisation, they’re loyal if nothing else.”

“Okisuke, Urakaku, send orders to begin level two battle preparations immediately. And to hunt down Sasuke.”

“Uchiha Sasuke is a former Konoha-nin.” Hatake said, rising to a stand. “I ask that he be captured to be brought back to Konoha to be tried as such.”

“You have no right to request anything, bringing that vermin before me!” The Raikage boomed, pointing a massive finger at Sakura. Damn, she probably should have covered her scars with a henge. She heard Hatake tense behind her and she abruptly cut off the flow of storm to her chokutō. “And Uchiha Sasuke lost the right to his life when he took my brother! SHII! DARUI! MOVE OUT!” The man yelled and then punched through the wall behind him.

“Sorry about the desk and the wall.” One of the guards said sheepishly.

“Forget that Darui! Get the lead out!”

“Sensei? What do we do?” Sakura asked and Hatake sighed.

“We cannot risk starting a war over Sasuke.” He sounded tired. “We will back up the Raikage’s forces and hope that we get an opportunity to capture him.” She nodded.

“Konoha isn’t going anywhere!” The giant Kiri guard said. “It’s your traitor that’s attacking this summit! How do we know you haven’t been helping him!”

“That’s enough Ao.” The Mizukage interrupted. “We have no reason to distrust them. Though I do think that the Raikage will be more than enough to handle him.” Her eyes drifted to Sakura. “Throwing the Null-Storm in his face will just anger him further and do more harm

than good.

“Sakura. Stay unseen.” Hatake ordered. She nodded and slammed on full stealth, ignoring the shocked protests of the people behind her and disappearing through the hole in the wall to follow the sounds of fighting.

The fight was happening a few rooms back from the entrance, the group having been caught mid-escape by the Raikage and his men. Sakura entered the room to find the Raikage and the Uchiha rushing towards each other in a massive burst of chakra, a man from each side knocked out, and one of the guards fighting a kid wielding what looking like half of Momochi’s sword, his body turning to water rather than taking damage.

Sakura paused and focused on her hearing. Just on the edge of it, above near the ceiling, there was a lone set of panicked breaths. It could be a samurai, but Sakura’s gut instinct made her doubt it.

She headed up the wall at record speed, leaping up and over the small railing to see a panicked looking girl launching away from her, her hands in a sensing sign. Sakura’s eyebrows rose, it would take a *very* good sensor to be able to feel her chakra.

She eyed the extremely red hair. Was the girl an Uzumaki?

The girl barely even put up a fight as Sakura darted forward, fingers smashing into a pressure point. She hauled the girl over her shoulder and and hopped back over the banister to see the Raikage having smashed the Uchiha into the ground hard enough to form a small crater and one of his guard leading the other away from the fight. The follower of the Uchiha that Sakura had seen briefly turn into water had been pinned by a lightning conducting sword against the wall.

She’d turned off the transparency jutsu when she’d grabbed the girl, unable to force her invisible as well, but she raced to appear next to one of the rushing samurai on the outskirts and handed the girl off. “Please take care of her, she’s a valuable prisoner.” The Samurai nodded and disappeared down a hallway. Sakura let the glassy feeling of the transparency jutsu wash back over her and set to work searching the rest of the room.

She couldn’t find anyone other than the visible four intruders. There was no sign of any other Akatsuki that could have helped the Uchiha get in but she had the crawling sensation of being watched the entire time. An alarming feeling considering only someone with the

Sharingan should have been capable of following her and the Uchiha was well and truly busy with fighting the Raikage.

In the centre of the room the Uchiha rose out of a crater. His eyes distinctly not the traditional pinwheel. She sucked in a breath and froze to watch, pressing herself into a shadowy ceiling corner.

The Uchiha rose in a monstrous construction of chakra. Great purple ribs of pure energy surrounding him in a morbid image. His flower patterned eye formed balls of black fire and it bled. The eye visibly straining and going unnaturally bloodshot.

The Raikage was ruthless. Using a technique similar to Sakura's own storm transformation to move at inhuman speeds and attack with unparalleled strength, he sacrificed his own arm and send the Uchiha flying. Sakura was mesmerised as she watched him prepare to sacrifice his own leg as well to the flames, just for a chance at a killshot.

This was grief she understood. She flexed and unflexed her right fist.

Then a wall of sand appeared between the combatants and the Kazekage and his guards were pouring into the room, closely followed by Hatake. Sakura dropped to land and walk behind him silently, still essentially invisible, a slight tilt to his head signalling he knew she was there. Bloody enhanced sense of smell.

The Raikage's leg was saved by a wall of sand and his arm was cut off before it could spread further and consume him completely.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING, KAZEKAGE?!" He boomed. "YOU'D BETTER HAVE A GOOD REASON FOR INTERFERING!"

"If I'd let you connect your leg would have been engulfed by the black flames, too." The Kazekage replied calmly. "Also I need to say something to Uchiha Sasuke"

But the Uchiha was ignoring the Kazekage entirely. Instead, his eyes were fixed on Hatake with a mixture of disbelief and growing rage. His voice was poisonous as he spoke. "Kakashi. And is it Sakura?" His eyes flicked to where she was standing. Sakura let her transparency jutsu drop. She was surprised he'd guessed it was her, but she supposed she had used the jutsu in front of him before. "Where is Shimura Danzō?!"

"He was killed in an ambush." Kakashi replied. Sakura's mind raced. She stepped forward.

“The fifth condemned his actions.” She said. Sasuke’s face twisted and she prepared herself to leap out of the way of the black flames. But they never came.

“What would you know?!” He spat.

“Quite a bit more than you.” She replied matter of factly. “Surrender yourself and I’ll share all of it with you. Physical files. Not suspicions or hearsay.” She took another step forward, Kakashi laid a warning hand on her shoulder.

Sasuke was hesitating. His face a mixture of confusion, hope and anger. It didn’t take long for the anger to win out. He wouldn’t come.

“NOW WAIT A MINU-”

A masked man appeared behind the Uchiha and sucked him... into his eye?

Kakashi moved in front of her. She took a heartbeat to glare at the wall of shoulders blocking her view before she leant sideways and peered around his arm.

“HOW ARE YOU?!” Boomed the Raikage.

“My name is Uchiha Madara. I am here to explain something to you.” The masked man said. At this distance Sakura’s eyesight could just catch the telltale flash of red of a Sharingan behind the hole. At least that explained who’d been watching her. “I will be waiting in the summit room, this is a question I wish to ask all of the Kages.” The man disappeared in a similar swirl to the one that took the Uchiha.

There was a moment of silence before.

“SHII!” The Raikage boomed.

“He’s with the other Kages sir.” The half dead one said, his fingers held up in a hand sign. He sent a disturbed glance at Sakura and she let her hold on her signature slip a little with a grin. He grimaced.

The Raikage roared and disappeared after the masked man. After a half moment, everyone else in the room raced that direction too.

They entered to find the masked man standing on a balcony overlooking the group, the Kage’s watching from down below. As the Raikage entered he launched towards the Akastuki, aiming for a

punch only to fly through the man instead.

He didn't miss. He went straight through.

Sakura had read the mission report- though none of it had mentioned the masked man apparently being *Uchiha fucking Madara*- but it was far more alarming to see in person than to just read about. It really hammered home just how grossly overpowered the ability was.

"I am Uchiha Madara. You will hear out my ultimate plan. The 'moon's eye' plan."

"HAND SASUKE OVER!" The Raikage yelled. The mask turned to look at him.

"After you listen to me and only if I like your response."

"Settle down Raikage, we'll let him say his piece."

"What do you want with Sasuke?" Hatake asked, once again having positioned himself in front of her.

"You have no idea how rare it is for a Sharingan user to awaken Susanoo. I'm just stockpiling good eyes." The masked man said, turning to focus in on the Hokage. "I also wanted him to further refine his eye techniques by putting him against the five Kages in real combat, so I helped him sneak in here. At best I thought he could weaken you all enough for me to take some hostages, but I guess that was asking too much."

"Hostages?! For what?"

"To speed along my 'moons eye' plan, of course."

"I admit I'm shocked to learn you're alive, Uchiha Madara. But why skulk around the shadows? You're powerful enough to get away with whatever plan you can think of."

"My fight with the shodai Hokage... with Hashirama left me severely wounded. I no longer have my former powers. Frankly, I consider myself a shell of my former self."

Sakura's eyes narrowed. Masked man won't take off his mask and cannot demonstrate Madara's powers because he was 'weakened' from the fight with Hashirama? Convenient.

She listened. She listened and her mind whirled and her skin crawled

with disbelief.

But it didn't matter if it was true or not. At the end of the day, she believed that the masked man believed it. That he would go to war for the last two jinchūriki.

The masked man disappeared and white monsters started growing from everyone but her. Duplicates of the one that the Raikage had killed.

Sakura *dearly* hoped the masked man had an army. The monster was roaring for blood.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for the surprise mini hiatus, Uni started up again and I was not prepared in the slightest so I took a week to get my head above it all and it won't happen again. For a related bit of advice, don't listen to anyone that says you'll be learn to manage the workload after your first year or so. What they fail to mention is that as you get better and better at managing your time effectively the workload also gets exponentially larger. So... have fun my fellow nerds <3

Everyone Wants a Piece of that S-ass-uke

Chapter Summary

Always listen to Sakura when she makes theories tired and/or after a close brush with death.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"I totally called it, you know. A ten-tailed beast sealed in the moon." Sakura said, trotting over the snow.

"You did, yes." Hatake agreed with a nod. "Next time I will pay more attention when you theorise about ancient celestial objects."

"That's a good attitude, Kashi." She said before her face twisted, he glanced at her curiously. "How positive are we that the masked Akatsuki is Uchiha Madara?"

"Almost certain. He's an exceptionally powerful Uchiha. There's only one that is unaccounted for in recent history." He replied.

"Right, but there's the problem." She said. "How do we know he's even an Uchiha, I definitely didn't see his Sharingan turn off."

"It's too much of a chakra drain to use as frequently as he did for non-Uchiha's. And even then, it's not like there's spare Sharingan's just floating around."

"Danzō had at least eleven." She said, Hatake froze.

A single, questioning eyebrow was turned on her.

"One in his right eye, ten implanted along his right arm. The arm also had a half formed face on it and was made of this really gross, plasticky flesh." She grimaced. "He sent a ROOT shinobi to capture Kabuto to 'alleviate his problems' with them so I assume they were remnants of when he was still paying Orochimaru to work for him."

Hatake sighed and started walking again, visibly trying to process the information she'd just dropped on him. "Danzō was paying Orochimaru?" His voice sounded like a drowning man clinging to a stick.

“We found research files from after Orochimaru was chased out of the village. Meaning that even after it was common knowledge what kind of experiments the Sannin was doing, Danzō harboured a wanted criminal and paid him to continue.” Sakura smiled humourlessly. “He also drove the Uchiha clan to attempt a coup d’état and then forced Uchiha Itachi to wipe the lot of them out. There’s some question about why Sasuke is still alive, but I suspect he was used as a bargaining chip of some sort.”

His slither of face turned sceptical. Sakura nodded.

“I spent the months you had me training with Gai making copies of the ROOT archives.” She tapped her forehead. “It’s what got me this.”

Hatake sighed, tired and resigned. Her lips quirked.

“You won’t be dealing with it alone, at least. I gave Shikaku the entirety of the copies before I came to get you.” She said cheerily, he looked a little less depressed at the news. “Besides, it’s not as if you’ve been inaugurated or anything, maybe Tsunada-sama will wake up just in the nick of time.”

“If only.”

“Don’t worry Kashi, even if you’re Hokage I’ll still come around to bother you.” She said with a shit eating grin. His eye turned conniving. Sakura felt a sudden, horrible, foreboding shudder work its way down her spine.

“You know, I heard that Bear was looking to retire soon.” He drawled and her eyes widened in horror.

“You wouldn’t!” Her voice was tinged with betrayal.

“You’re smart, experienced with all manner of roles around the village and you have an excellent mission record.” He began.

“I’ll do anything! Absolutely anything you want, Kashi, just don’t trap me in a paper job, *please*.” She begged, her hands clasped in prayer, and his eye smile turned smug for a second before it became more complicated. Sakura’s brow furrowed and she opened her mouth to ask when footsteps at the edge of her hearing caught her attention. “Someone’s heading our way. Fast.” She pointed in their direction, automatically averting her eyes as the mask was pulled down below Hatake’s nose and he breathed deeply.

"It's Sai?" He sounded unsure. Another breath. "It's an ink clone." The gentle scratching of fabric being pushed into place sounded and Sakura glanced back at him. He nodded and they took off at a sprint towards the incoming clone.

"Kakashi-sensei! Sakura!" The Sai clone said. "It's Shikamaru. He's leading a team and chasing after Sasuke. They're intent on killing him."

"Where." Hatake said with a growl.

"This way." The clone said, turning and running. They followed. "It's Shikamaru, Kiba, Lee and my original body. The Konoha eleven decided as a group they had to kill Sasuke. Shikamaru decided he needed to be the one to tell Naruto himself. Naruto was obviously against it, but was stopped from following us by Yamato."

"He didn't stop the four of you?" Hatake asked and the clone grimaced.

"He tried, but we slipped away whilst he was dealing with Naruto."

"And why have you changed your mind and gotten us involved?" Sakura asked.

"Naruto was very...emphatic." The clone said with a forlorn look. "I believe killing Sasuke may be the wrong decision."

"Do everything in your power to stop the group from reaching Sasuke." Hatake ordered. "Sasuke's too strong, they won't be able to beat him."

"Understood." The clone said.

They ran mostly in silence, only the soft panting and gentle footfalls giving away their presence.

"Things are getting tense. We need to hurry up."

A few more minutes passed before the clone started to melt.
"Shikamaru's knocked me out. Please hurry!"

They both picked up the pace.

Sakura followed Hatake as he landed on a stretch of road, New Kid's unconscious form laid out in the dirt. As the man checked him over, she stretched out her hearing, picking up the sounds of four sets of

footfalls on the edge of her range.

“I can hear them.” She said, he moved New Kid onto the grass, out of the line of sight from the road, and gestured for her to lead the way. By unspoken agreement, she used her nature transformation to speed her movements and Hatake pushed himself to match her.

They both knew the others were dead if they fought Sasuke.

“Why have you appeared before me?”

Her foot hit a branch, she forced her charka faster. Pushed more out to cover her further. Until her very mind felt like it was speeding up.

“As Konoha Shinobi, we are here to eliminate you and stop the darkness you are spreading.”

Her cells crackled and charged with energy. She began to leave Hatake behind. She pulled a kunai to clearly mark her path through the trees. He didn’t need it, but it would make things easier for him.

“Don’t make me laugh. You think you can kill me? Three chūnin and a dog?”

She became little more than a blur of blue through the trees. A bridge came into sight, the white bricks glistening with rain. The three chūnin standing on her side, the Uchiha on the other. The Uchiha’s shadow was caught but he was ignoring it.

“You’ve already been caught.” The Nara said. Sakura launched at him the same moment the Uchiha’s eyes bled into stars.

Black flames engulfed the spot the two of them had been a moment before.

“You idiots.” Sakura said to a shocked trio of boys. “Need to run.”

“We’ll hold him off.” Kakashi added, appearing beside her and immediately moving to distract Uchiha with conversation.

“We’re going to fight him together!” The Inuzuka insisted. His dog whined. Apparently the dog was the smart one.

“It it very unyouthful t-” Sakura blurred and pulled the green kid out of the way of another swirl of black flames. The Nara was staring wide-eyed at the ribs of pure chakra that had appeared around the Uchiha.

“As your superior, I am ordering the three of you to leave. I refuse to protect you any longer.” With that she threw herself into the fight, tagging out with Kakashi in an instinctive movement driven by long hours of practice drills. She tested a fist against the construct, it hit like a solid wall.

“Susanoo is the ultimate defence.” Sasuke said. The construct grew an arm, the hand slamming into where she’d been just a second before. Her chakra was working overtime, driving her faster and faster.

She ducked and rolled under a swipe of the chakra arm, a blast of water from Kakashi driving it backwards before it could follow her, and gathered chakra in her fist.

Her memory of the fight with the Pein’s was blurry, but she remembered smashing the foul summon distinctly. Sakura expanded her senses to feel the construct’s signature, and forced the chakra building in her fist into it’s opposite.

She hit. Released. The rib exploded. The entire construct shattered.

“That’s impossible!” Sasuke screamed. Kakashi burst from the ground below him, kunai in his hand as he went for the kid’s heart.

They were aiming to kill, then.

Sasuke just barely dodged, a thick line of red appearing over his ribs, right eye widening and Sakura flickered away just as another ball of black flame appeared where she’d been standing a moment before. The edge of her skirt caught and she slashed through it mercilessly, working on forcing her chakra back up to speed.

Sakura felt tendrils of foreign chakra seeping into her system and she threw it in reverse for a moment. Stopping the illusion before it could even start. It didn’t take much. The jutsu had been sloppy and obvious, even without her control. Sasuke had used far too much chakra in his panic.

Kakashi was driving the kid back, attacking him in a flurry of Taijutsu and kunai that Sasuke was only just dodging. Sakura dashed in, intent on backing Hatake up, when a wave of chakra poured out of the kid and Hatake was thrown backwards, a massive skeleton-like figure bursting up from Sasuke. The bridge shook.

Sakura changed courses and grabbed the flying man, catching his arm and righting him before he crashed into a wall. Kakashi was panting

and the top of a bruise was visible at the edge of the mask, but his limbs were steady as he stood.

Sasuke was screaming and clutching at his eye, blood pouring down his face, but he seemed be mentally working himself up to something. His face twisting further and further in anguish. Pulses of wasted chakra being pushed into the air around him.

The skeleton shifted. A massive knight appearing instead, one hand with a crossbow and the other with a giant sword.

A giant bolt of energy raced towards them.

Her hand shot out, her chakra covered Hatake's and they flickered backwards fifteen metres.

Sakura fell to a knee and coughed blood. Dimly aware that the bridge had exploded. She closed her eyes through the head rush and opened them just in time to see Kakashi standing before her and a second, giant arrow heading straight for them.

Her storm transformation had died out and she wouldn't have enough chakra to flicker Kakashi as well even if it hadn't. Her hands were shaking on the ground. She'd never tried doing that before and she found herself abruptly glad. It had used twenty four percent of her reserves and she'd only reached half her normal range for the move. There was a mixture of bile and blood in the back of her throat. The familiar numb sensation of chakra exhaustion creeping into her skin. She couldn't dodge.

Hatake didn't even try.

Instead, the arrow simply disappeared into nothingness a moment before it would have hit.

"I can't believe you, a non-Uchiha, awakened the Mangekyou Sharingan. So that's what saved you, your eye's ability." The Uchiha said from inside the chakra construct. "I hope you're grateful to the Uchiha."

"Sasuke." Hatake said, standing tall. "Your clan and your hatred can't be the only things left in your heart. Look deep inside of yourself one last time."

"Still reciting the same old phrases."

“You know what’s really there.”

“...They’re all laughing.” The Uchiha said. “They’re all laughing it up! At the cost of Itachi’s life! Cackling in unison with no idea of the price he paid! All I hear is laughter now! Scorn and ridicule! But I’ll change it, I’ll turn your laughter into screams of anguish!”

The construct morphed into a giant nightmare creature that bled furious, violet chakra like a slit throat before rapidly fading. The Uchiha was left blinking at the other side of the bridge, his eyes morphed back into his natural black as they blinked and flickered wildly over the bridge.

“Is he... blind?” Sakura asked, pushing shakily back to her feet. Hatake steadied her with a hand on her shoulder as she wobbled. All of her insides felt bruised. She was beginning to wonder if she hadn’t just only moved her outsides in her haste, leaving her stationary organs to be slammed against her ribcage as the bones were shunted by the jutsu.

Of course if that had happened she’d probably have liver dripping out of her ears but something had definitely gone wrong. She made a mental note to never try that move again.

“Every use of the Mangekyou deteriorates your vision slightly.” Hatake said and she glanced upward at the his own Sharingan in alarm.

A yellow and orange blur launched over them and landed between them and the Uchiha.

“Sasuke! Tobi told us the truth about Itachi!” The Uzumaki shouted. “I don’t know if I believe him or not, but either way, everything you’ve done, I understand why you did it!”

The Uchiha visibly flinched.

“Naruto. I told you once before, you never had parents or siblings. You never had anyone.” The Uchiha’s face and tone were poisonous. “So shut up you outsider!”

“Danzō is dead.” Sakura said. “You’re playing a tragedy without a villain. There is no one to get revenge on.”

The Uchiha’s face twisted into deranged superiority. “Of course there is.” He snarled. “EVERY LAST PERSON IN KONOHA!”

The Uchiha threw himself forward with a Chidori, the Uzumaki throwing himself to meet him with a rasengan. Hatake tried to stop him but was stopped by a shadow clone latching onto his arms.

Sakura didn't bother trying.

The jutsu hit. The world exploded.

Sakura stumbled backwards and found herself being lifted by Hatake as he leapt away from the centre of the explosion. An arm around her waist pressing her against his side and keeping her suspended off the ground, her hands automatically clinging to his shirt to help stay upright. They landed on the grass, the dust settling to show the bridge almost entirely gone.

Sakura spent half a moment fighting incredibly inappropriate arousal before she glanced down and scowled. Her ankles only just reached his knees, despite the fact he'd only lifted her so her chin just reached over his shoulder.

The Uzumaki had been caught by his shadow clones. The Uchiha had been caught by the Akatsuki that had appeared at the kage summit.

"Now. I'm certain." The Uzumaki said, staring at the Uchiha on the other side of the gorge.

"Certain of what?" Hatake asked, staring at Uzumaki's back and sounding thoroughly annoyed at the entire situation. "What the hell are you talking about!?"

In a swirl of colour, the masked man appeared.

"I thought I told you to come back and rest." He said, staring at the Uchiha. The mask turned towards them. "The Kyuubi..." Sakura wondered if the Uzumaki was going to be disappeared like the Uchiha had been. "When we fight them, it will be in a more suitable place. For now we retreat."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Let me handle them. We've gotta handle the Kyuubi sometime, right?" The white freak said and a mass of more white freaks melted out of the trees.

"No, Zetsu. I don't think you'll be able to capture Naruto. You're really not a front line fighter, the Kyuubi is too much. We'll leave that hunt

to Sasuke, it should be entertaining.” The masked man said. “Plus I’m worried about Kisame. Go check up on him and rejoin with you blacker half on the way.”

“Aye, aye sir.”

“Naruto.” Hatake said as the Uzumaki stepped forward to the very edge of the smashed bridge. Sakura became abruptly aware she had not yet been put down. Hatake was a solid pillar of warmth that she was using to ground herself against the cottony feeling of mild chakra exhaustion- closer to just extreme fatigue than anything- and the dull throbbing pain from her squishy, human organs. She was somewhat worried she’d burst something, but she figured she’d be feeling a lot worse and coughing up more blood if it was serious.

“I know.” The blonde said. “But first there’s something I need to say to Sasuke.”

“C’mon, Sasuke.” The masked man said but the Uchiha pushed him aside, forcing himself standing as he did.

“Wait.” The Uchiha teen muttered and walked to the opposite edge of the bridge. Both teens staring at each other across the gap, faces screaming DETERMINATION.

“Sasuke.” The Uzumaki started. “Do you remember what you told me back in the valley of the end? About top-class ninjas. One direct clash later I understand a lot more. We’ve become top-class ninjas, Sasuke. Both of us. So tell me, did you see what was in my heart? How I really feel? Did you see what would happen if we fight again?

“We’re both going to die.” It was deadly serious. Sakura let out an exasperated huff.

“Our battle will be inevitable if you really do attack Konoha. So keep your hatred and let it fester and hit me with it full force. I’m the only one who can bear the full brunt of your hate! It’s my job and no one else!

“I’ll bear the burden of your hatred and then we’ll die together!” The Uzumaki screamed across the gap.

“What?!” The Uchiha’s voice was incredulous. “What the fuck is wrong with you?! Why do you care about me so much?!”

“Because I’m your friend.” The Uchiha looked like he might cry.

“Sasuke, we’ll never understand each other through words alone. I knew that from the moment I met you. The only way you and I can communicate properly is through our fists! Remember what I said, we’re both top-class ninjas now! I haven’t given up yet!”

Sakura was exasperated.

“Still, I’m done ranting at you. If we really do take this all the way to the end and we both die, we won’t be Uchiha, jinchūriki or anything. They’ll be no more burdens to bear, we’ll come to understand each other in the next world!”

“I will never change!” The Uchiha responded. “I don’t want us to understand each other! And I’m not going to die, you will!”

Hatake stepped forward. “Enough Naruto, I’ll handle Sasuke. You still have a dream of becoming the Hokage. Sasuke may have fallen, but don’t let him drag you down, too-”

“How could I call myself Hokage if I can’t even save one friend?! The only person Sasuke’s fighting is me!”

“Have it your way. I’ll kill you first.”

“Any time. You still haven’t accepted me as an equal!” The Uzumaki said. Did he really see himself as the Uchiha’s equal? They could be if the Uzumaki trained a heck of a lot more, but this was the same kid who didn’t train unless he was forced to.

Sakura gave up on the pair. She accepted that she would never understand teenage boys and decided that if the Uzumaki wanted to march to his death and the Uchiha wanted to spend his days miserable they could do so. If Uzumaki wanted to flush the years of work she’d poured into him down the drain than that was his prerogative. He wasn’t worth the attachment she’d previously felt.

Hatake set her down- lowering her to sitting when she’d wobbled and proved unable to remain standing under her own power- and stepped forwards. She pushed the subsequent wave of disappointment firmly into the very back of her mind.

“Okay. Sasuke is all yours, Naruto.” He said. “But take care of my body, alright?”

Wait what?

Hatake leaned forward. A fist clenched. Sakura assumed he was using the Mangekyou.

Nothing happened.

“Don’t bother Kakashi.” The masked man said, a strange humour in his voice. “Techniques like that have no effect on me. Let’s go Sasuke.”

“Madara.” The Uchiha said, confirming that he did also think that the mask man was Uchiha Madara. “You and I need to talk.”

The three vanished in a swirl of colour.

“I’m ready when you are, Sasuke.” The Uzumaki said.

Sakura’s mind was whirling. ‘Techniques like that have no effect on me’ rang in her ears.

Did he mean Mangekyou techniques in general? Would something like the black flames work on him? Or was it specifically Hatake’s Mangekyou that didn’t work on the masked man? Could their techniques cancel each other out? Would that mean they were opposites? Or somehow different versions of the same?

Sakura pressed her eyes shut against a number of wild leaps and connections that her sleep addled brain was both half making and pulling from nowhere. The lack of logical pathways left her head ringing as she tried to pull the pieces together. She couldn’t tell if her ideas made sense or if her fatigue just led her to believing they did.

She really couldn’t wait for the seal to be finished. Sakura was never going to be this pathetic after a fight again.

When she opened her eyes again Hatake was crouched before her and she climbed onto his back with a smile.

“Thanks, Kashi!” She said cheerfully as he stood with a fond sounding sigh, one hand holding her up whilst the other pushed down his hitai-ate again.

“Time to go.” He said and the Uzumaki nodded, the blonde wearing a pensive expression as his eyes lingered on the spot the Uchiha had disappeared from.

They started walking back towards the road and Sakura hummed.

“Hey Kakashi, what exactly does your Mangekyou do?”

“It’s Kamui. It sends what I aim it at into another dimension.” He said.

“In a swirl?” She asked and he paused.

“Yes.”

“Maybe he uses a different version of the same technique then, and that’s why it didn’t work on him.” She rested her chin against the man’s shoulder and dutifully ignored the way his hands had tightened painfully on her thighs where they held her up.

Sakura had read the mission reports. The more she considered it, the less she thought the similarities between the techniques were coincidences. Nor was which eye, exactly, the masked man used. Whilst the chances of Uchiha Obito having survived half his body being crushed were near zero, that chances of a single eye surviving the destruction and someone with large enough chakra reserves to handle it or another Uchiha getting their hands on it?

Not that low.

“When he teleports is he just throwing himself into the other dimension and then appearing somewhere else of his choice? And his ‘intangibility’ could instead be him putting the body parts that were attacked into the other dimension.” She mused. “Do you think it’s the same dimension as yours? Is there a history of Uchiha’s with eyes all linked to the same place? If the masked man goes into the dimension after you’ve used your eye on something would it be in there?” A smile stretched on her face and she started giggling at the imagery, the exhaustion and resulting lightheadedness making her giddy. “Imagine if he had like a secret base in the dimension and every time you used it just random weapons and various body parts appeared all over his furniture.”

She buried her face into the fabric of the flak jacket to- unsuccessfully- stifle the giggling.

“Is Sakura-chan alright, Kakashi-sensei?” The Uzumaki- loudly- whispered to the man. He sighed.

“She’s just a bit tired.” He replied.

“Is that why she’s all...” the blonde gestured at where Sakura was giggling hysterically into Hatake’s flak jacket, one hand pressed over

her mouth and her entire body shaking with the effort of suppressing them.

“Aah.” Hatake confirmed solemnly.

Sakura couldn't help it, she just kept picturing the masked man obsessively cleaning his super-secret alternate dimension base, only for Hatake to have a bad mission and someone's torso or head appearing in the middle of it all.

Oh, god, what about the giant chakra arrow?

“Come on.” Hatake said, shifting her weight and grabbing one of her hands with her own. In a pavlovian response from months of nights doing the same thing, she switched her chakra to his. “Time to calm.” He murmured.

Sakura's giggles died out as the warmth flooded through her. The feeling of warmth running through her system and into her forehead causing her to relax subconsciously. She snuffled and squirmed closer to his back, free hand twisted in the fabric of his shoulder and face pressed against green.

It didn't take long for the rushing to stop, Hatake not having that much chakra left after using the Sharingan, and Sakura yawned. The rhythmic rocking of his strides and the slow warmth quickly lulled her to sleep.

-

Sakura awoke to a finger poking the side of her face. She screwed her eyes closed and tried to bat the offending appendage away, only to be forced further out of her sleepiness by the finger dodging and moving to poke her forehead antagonistically. She forced her eyes open to look up at Hatake eye smiling down at her.

“Maa, Sakura-chan. Time to wake up.” He drawled delightedly. “You were cleared by the medics whilst you slept, get one of these guys to give you a hand if you're still too tired to get around on your own. I have to go and be officially inaugurated as Hokage.” She snorted and her mouth pulled into a smile.

“Have fun with that.”

His eye smile turned threatening, she back peddled. Fast.

Her face light up in an overblown supportive grin and she patted his arm a bit too rapidly. "I mean I'll totally support your appointment in any way I can, I'm sure you'll do great with everyone helping you out as they definitely will!" Her voice high and fluttery with nerves.

He wore a smug expression as he disappeared in a swirl of leaves. Sakura's face dropped and she looked around her surroundings, realising the man had placed her on top of a giant pile of wood. She swung her legs over the edge and watched the teens gathering below her, the Inuzuka and his dog settling on top of the wood opposite her and the green kid sitting next to her. He sent her a nervous look, a blush developing on his face, and shuffled a centimetre closer. She tactfully ignored it.

She figured she'd just punch him if he came within a half metre of her.

Naruto- untactfully- declared that he was planning to fight the Uchiha one on one and that none of them were allowed to interfere.

"You're going to fight Sasuke alone!?" The girl with the buns roared, smashing a fist against the wood. Unfortunately for her, Sakura was Sakura and trying to make a point by not being able to even break a plank was entirely unimpressive when she was there. "And you think all of us are just going to stand back and let you?!"

"Tenten's right, Naruto. We can't afford to let you have your way on this one. This is a problem for the whole village." The Nara interjected. Sakura tilted her head, she would have thought he, of all people, would get what Uzumaki was trying to do. Especially after seeing just how outmatched he'd been.

"So this is what you meant when you said you'd 'explain when we got back'?" Yelled the Inuzuka. "We're all prepared to kill Sasuke, man!"

"I'm not trying to be selfish." The Uzumaki said honestly.

"Naruto, you're not trying to convince us to let you handle this so you can turn around and protect Sasuke, are you?" The Nara said.

Sakura snorted. Loudly. The group turned to stare up at her. "You really don't get it, do you?" She said, her tone far too cutting to be considered nice. "Sasuke is out of your league." She hissed.

"Currently, I am the strongest one here. Frankly, I'm pretty sure I could take on all of you at once with my hands tied behind my back." There was some disbelieving mumbling, but not as much as she'd expected. She'd been getting a lot more respect since the invasion.

Apparently most of the village knew she'd killed two of the Pein's and had actually seen her explode a mountain sized summon with just a fist. She leant forward, eyes narrowed as they ran over the gathered group.

"If I took on Sasuke seriously right now, I would die." She said matter of factly. Their faces turned downtrodden. "The good news is, whilst I am currently the strongest here, I am *not* the one with the most potential. That is Naruto." She pointed at the Uzumaki. "Naruto is the only one of us here that has the potential to match up to Sasuke. In fact, Naruto's probably the only one in the *village* with the potential to match up to Sasuke's full potential. He is taking the brunt of that potential because otherwise, it would just end as another Pein but *without* the life returning Deus ex Machina."

The group was grim faced. Sakura turned to the Uzumaki and smiled reassuringly.

"Naruto, train hard, I believe in you." She said and he grinned back. Maybe if he did he'd actually make it. She wasn't lying about his potential, just maybe exaggerating how likely she thought it was that he'd reach it within the next decade. The harder he trained, at least, the easier it would be for her to stab a tired Uchiha in the back after Uzumaki was dead. "You're always welcome to come to me if you need help with your chakra control or you just want to spar."

"Thanks Sakura-chan!" The Uzumaki said with a thumbs up.

She hopped off the wood and landed beside him. "Wanna go get a smoothie and then hit up Ichiraku?" She asked and he cheered, turning and heading towards the village with a hurried bye to the others.

Sakura waved dismissively over her shoulder as they left.

They all needed the wake up call. Even the male Hyuuga- whilst strong on paper- had a pathetically small mission record, making jōnin thanks to his clan connections but with none of the actual battle experience backing him.

War was coming. If they didn't wise up, they would die.

(Naruto never made it to Ichiraku's, instead poofing out of existence just as they walked out of Panda's new smoothie shop. The last time she'd seen that happen it had been done by the toads, so Sakura figured it was probably fine. Maybe.)

(She had a smoothie to enjoy, after all.)

Chapter End Notes

Only seven more left!!! It seems not that many for how much further the plot has to go but then you remember that half of the manga was the fourth Shinobi war that was a dull nightmare of repetitive plot twists of nOw ThIs GuY iS SeCrEtLy BeHinD eVeRyThInG. Needless to say, my war only takes up three chapters and one of those is dedicated to cool sword fighting.

Get HYPPPPED

Also for those of you that want overt romance that doesn't happen until the last three chapters- which is the post war stuff- but of those three chapters I have five different version which are all basically spawned from 3am me going 'fuck but what if they had sex HERE instead?!' I mean at the moment Sakura's viewpoint on the whole issue is she doesn't want to rock the boat- even if she's a massive fucking tease who physically cannot open her mouth without flirting with the poor man- so Kakashi has to be the one to initiate and he's late for everything.

I'll probably end up posting whichever one's I don't choose as Omake but there's also the AU of this fic that starts directly after chapter 26 of this one so I don't know when anything will be anything.

Love, your patchwork Author.

<3

(And it's not unrealistic that Sakura would piece together Obito's jutsu after seeing it only a couple of times, canon Sakura actually did it and no one listened to her because she was fucking useless the other 99% of her page time.)

Preparing for War.

Chapter Summary

Sakura finds a dog in her bedroom, breaks a concrete wall and underestimates her own notoriety.

Sakura was laughing. There were tears at the corner's of her eyes and her face was flushed. A half eaten ramen bowl sat before her. The Uzumaki devouring bowls on her left and Hatake reading porn above an empty one on her right.

"Mid sentence!" She laughed, a hand clutching her ribs and the other half fisted and covering her mouth, chopsticks hanging loosely from her grip. "You know I can't tell if Team Seven has the worst luck or the best." She said, finally calming. Hatake raised an eyebrow at her. "Everything always goes to shit, but then we're always saved just in the nick of time."

"It's totally true!" The Uzumaki agreed between mouthfuls of noodles. "Do we get into these situations because we're Team Seven or do we *survive* these situations because we're Team Seven?"

"Such is the fundamental question about the meaning of the universe." Sakura added, her smile aching her cheeks.

"Maa, it's almost like my cute little students don't think I'd be a good Hokage." Hatake drawled, his voice teasing in a way that made the Uzumaki grin, but Sakura picked up the layer of actual insecurity beneath it. She sobered, setting down her chopsticks and turning to look at the man seriously.

"Kakashi." She said and he glanced up to blink at her. "You would be a fucking fantastic Hokage." Her tone was entirely earnest.

"You totally would!" The Uzumaki agreed.

"I'm just happy you're not going to be put under the kind of stress leading a war would bring."

...Was Kakashi blushing?

There just the lightest dusting of red visible, just at the edge of Hatake's mask. Sakura stared.

She hadn't ever seen him blush before. Frankly, it hadn't even crossed her mind that he was capable of it. A smirk crossed her face. She'd already made it her mission to make New Kid blush as often as possible, it wouldn't be hard to extend that to Hatake too.

After all, what's some friendly teasing between friend. *Just friends.*

-

A soccer ball sized hole had appeared straight through the training ground wall.

Sakura stared.

Aside from the fact that the wall was over three metres thick of solid stone, she could also see the hole continue through the trees on the other side, slowly getting thinner and thinner until it finally stopped about the length of a football pitch away.

Shiranui whistled behind her.

"What was that?" He asked, voice tinged with awe.

"A kekkai tōta." Sakura replied, still a little numb with shock at actually being able to produce such a thing. "Water, wind and lightning combined."

"How long have you been trying to figure that out?" He asked.

"About three years." She mumbled. "Though two of those were spent just learning how to use wind release." She turned wide eyes on the man. "That used up a third of my available reserves."

He grinned. "Wanna bet you can halve that?" She grinned back at him and turned, holding her hands in a diamond in front of her face and concentrating.

Every shinobi was naturally suited to producing certain nature transformations, these being their affinities, but that did not mean they weren't capable of producing others. For example, F-rank jutsu were considered jutsu that anyone could learn and produce easily. They were usually only small, like filling a water bottle or starting a campfire, and usually used an inordinate amount of hand signs. Fire being her hardest to produce element, it took Sakura twenty three to use the ANBU scroll burning jutsu.

Very few shinobi in history had managed to master all five elemental transformations. Sakura was quite determined to become one of them.

Unfortunately, the basic process of learning elements that weren't your affinity- at least according to the process documented by the Nidaime and if you wanted to use them as proficiently as your own affinity, which for Sakura meant producing the pure thing without handsigns- was not dissimilar to learning to punch mountains but much, much, much slower. The movement of the chakra had to be carved into your pathways until it felt completely natural to use, something achieved by performing a jutsu of that transformation over and over and over again. Shortly after joining the ANBU, Sakura had started with her easiest to perform non-affinity element. Wind.

Combining that into her storm chakra frankly went against everything they knew about kekkai genkai. The accepted theory of these was that certain people were born with the ability to produce combinations of elements, finding that they came naturally to them. Sakura's storm chakra was an example of this, whilst she didn't follow the common logic of kekkai genkai being passed through family lines, she found the chakra far easier to produce than simply lightning or water on its own. It was a known fact that people can only combine elements they have affinities with.

Sakura disagreed.

Chakra swirled between her hands, the lightning charged water cooling and hardening into an unbelievably sharp point, a hair thin senbon made of something that Tristan would describe as solid plasma spinning faster than the eye could see.

She released the technique, sending it shooting forward in a blur from her hands and forming a second hole above the first. This one was about the size of a trashcan. She'd managed to get the rotation to a much higher velocity this time.

Shiranui clapped behind her as she panted. Sweat had beaded on her forehead.

"That was only about nine percent of my chakra." She said with a smile. "And it was much easier than the first time." The senbon was shifting slowly in his mouth and his eyes were considering.

"Normally I wouldn't condone this kind of training, but we're leaving for Lightning to join the war effort in two days." Shiranui threw a tin of soldier pills at her. "I want this under five percent and almost

instantaneous before we do.”

Sakura nodded and bit into a soldier pill, grimacing at the rush of forced energy, and threw her hands back into position.

She had a lot of work to do.

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Sakura woke up to a heavy weight on her brand new blanket in the bed of her brand new house. Rebuilding a village in a world with jutsu's and a military dictatorship perfectly willing to force their citizens to help the construction efforts took surprisingly little time. It also helped that her position as a jōnin gave her priority on replacing her belongings and she now had a slightly bigger house than the one that was levelled.

She didn't panic because she knew herself well enough to know that even if she didn't remember it she would have woken up the moment someone came into her room- the response she had been more than conditioned into thanks to Shiranui's complete disregard for privacy and Hatake's attitude that privacy only existed right up until he wanted something- and that she had just gone back to sleep meant she was fine with this arrangement. Instead she opened her eyes and immediately closed them again as a massive burst of terrible smelling, boiling air is blown straight into her face.

Sakura peeled her eyes back open to see a massive, floppy dog lying on top of her covers. Staring at her with his tail wagging wildly.

“Bull.” She greeted, entirely confused by this turn of events. She'd never actually seen one of Hatake's ninken without either Hatake or Pakkun with them before.

“Smart girly!” He greeted back, in his tuba of a voice that the dog rarely used. He also, apparently, had been listening too much to Pakkun. The words blew another wash of dog breath into her face. She carefully pulled an arm out from under her blankets and pushed his head to face another direction. The contact made the giant dog's tail wag even harder and start panting out of excitement.

She considered demanded answers for a moment but Bull just kept getting more and more excited, tail wagging into a blur as she gently petted the top of his head. Sakura sighed.

“Get off and I'll make you breakfast.”

Bull was off her bed in a second, tail wagging a mile a minute and now with added slobber trails hanging from his jowls. Sakura stumbled down to the kitchen and spent the morning tossing the giant dog balls of ground beef.

Later, when the ninken had disappeared into smoke and Sakura was feeling less like she'd woken up in some strange alternate reality, she caught up with Hatake just as he was walking between war preparation meetings.

"If you're going to send your dogs to my place you'd better be planning on paying me back for their breakfasts."

He just eye smiled and ruffled her hair and rushed off to do presumably important things. Which meant he never actually agreed to pay her back. The fucking asshole.

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Sakura felt the seal click into place midway through draining a random chūnin's chakra. The Hokage, frustrated with the almost complete rhombus and stressed about leaving for the allied forces headquarters the next day, had ordered the shinobi in the village who weren't working to line up and let Sakura drain their chakra until it was complete.

It was an intensely surreal experience.

It was also completely different from finding the seal on her collarbones that Sakura was beginning to heavily suspect was not actually a seal of a hundred but instead just a weird, chakra fuelled Tristan-piggyback.

Not only did Sakura suddenly find herself with her full reserves available, but she found herself intimately aware of how every tiny drop of her chakra was moving and interacting with the world around her. In fact- Sakura frowned down at the hand in her grip, the chakra from the man no longer draining but her signature still mimicking his- she also found herself intimately aware of how every tiny drop of the man's chakra was moving and interacting with the world around him.

She pulled some from the man and it followed easily. She pushed some of hers into his and it blended seamlessly. Whilst it wasn't pleasant, the sensation like bugs under her skin, the difficulty of doing so had completely disappeared. The chūnin looked uncomfortable.

“Um, are we done? I can’t feel it draining anymore.” The man said, Sakura ignored him to instead look at the Hokage sitting next to her, the woman buried deep under a pile of paperwork she hadn’t been able to stop her assistant from bringing from her office.

“Shishou.” Sakura said and the woman looked up, glancing at the finished rhombus with a smile.

“What’s it like?” She asked, eyes sparkling. “It’s designed to dramatically increase your chakra control, what did it do for you?”

“I know everything.” Sakura said, her eyes distant. “Every interaction between my chakra and my body down to the individual atom. But it’s not overwhelming at all, even though that amount of information definitely should be.”

“Fascinating.” The woman mumbled.

“But it’s not just that.” Sakura said and pointed at the chūnin she was still holding hands with. “I also know all of that information about him, too.”

The Hokage blinked, as if having just noticed that the line of shinobi were still waiting impatiently and there was an increasingly more disturbed looking chūnin on the other side of the desk. She stood and pulled on her booming speech voice. “Thank you all for sacrificing your chakra and your time tonight!” She cried. “Due to your help one of our village’s strongest will be able to unleash her full powers on the front lines and will help lead us all to victory! Now go home, eat well and kiss your loved ones good night for tomorrow, for the first time in history, we unite with the other villages and we fight to save the world!”

They cheered. Sakura just felt a little stupefied as she watched the crowd disperse, the chūnin across from her dropping her hand and walking away hurriedly.

The Senju looked between her stacks of paperwork and Sakura forlornly before sighing in defeat.

“The moment this war ends I’m monopolising all of your time to experiment, got it?” The Hokage said sternly and Sakura nodded. The Senju waved her off. “Go sleep, brat.”

“What about ice zap?!”

“Thundersnow!”

“Peircing ice lighting!”

“Freezer burn!”

“All of these are terrible.”

“Charged frost!”

“Icebolt!”

“Super-charged hail bullets!”

“Since her original technique is called storm, wouldn’t the addition of cold make it a blizzard?”

“But that’s just so normal sounding, Shinobu!”

“I’m in favour of blizzard.”

“Don’t encourage him Pinky!”

“Blizzard release it is!”

“You’re all no fun.”

“And you two are terrible at names.”

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Sakura walked through the crowd. Having been thrown bodily out of the tent and told to take a break by Morino, she’d decided to take the opportunity to explore the Allied Shinobi headquarters.

Positioned in between a series of cliff sides, large, bowl-like building’s loomed above them, with the ground covered in rows upon rows of canvas tents. All manor of shinobi streaming through the walkways.

It was surprisingly amicable.

Sakura honestly hadn’t expected the six countries to be able to cooperate in this manor, but she supposed the threat of the world domination delivered by a man claiming to be a universally feared legend was a motivating one. There were plenty of arguments and

dirty looks between the different groups, but Sakura had yet to see any actual fights break out.

She gained quite a few odd looks as she walked- she assumed they were a product of being one of the shortest members of the youngest generation brought to the fight and wearing her pink hair loose and down to the small of her back- but she ignored them and hummed happily under her breath. A skip to her step as she walked. Every cell in her body buzzing excitedly at the prospect of participating in an all out genocide. She was worried too, it was highly likely some of the people she considered hers would end up dying, but Sakura had largely turned that portion of her brain off.

There was no use worrying about sentimentality until the war was over.

A Kumo shinobi had stopped in his tracks and was staring at her with narrowed eyes, the two woman either side of him trying to get his attention. Sakura quirked an eyebrow at him and his expression turned into a delighted smile.

He beelined for her, the lollipop stick hanging out of his mouth and flapping wildly in a way that was reminiscent of Shiranui, and Sakura felt dread pool in her stomach as she tried valiantly to keep walking and ignore the guy.

It was not to be.

“Aiko-chan!” He said excitedly and fell into step next to her. His two friends slotting in beside him with foreboding expressions of realisation on their faces. “I was wondering if you’d show up, but then I thought what if the headquarter’s position in Lightning made you too afraid to come as your real self, leading to your inaction during the war, tipping the scales just in the enemies favour, dooming us to never cross paths again and leading you to kill yourself from the shame of your mistakes.”

Oh. Sakura recognised the shinobi’s insane train of thought. “Shinobi-san.” She greeted, tone flat. She’d rather been hoping that in the commotion her identity as the Null-Storm would remain a secret until everyone was safely ensconced in their own countries, but apparently she had no such luck.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know my name!” He said.

“I’m afraid I forgot, shinobi-san.”

"It's Omoi! Omoi!" He insisted, apparently not having changed in the slightest.

"Wait, hang on, you're the Null-Storm, yeah?" Said the dark skinned girl, in almost the exact same loud and belligerent manner as the boy talked. Sakura wondered if they were siblings. At the very least they must have spent a lot of time together. Perhaps the three had been a genin team?

"Yes." Sakura confirmed, knowing there was no real way of avoiding it. "I hope that won't be a problem?"

"There are more important things to focus on that petty feuds." The light skinned one said, exuding an air of calm professionalism in almost the exact opposite manner of the chaotic energy pouring off the other two.

"Fair enough. I'm Haruno Sakura, it's a pleasure to meet you all." Sakura greeted with a grin.

"Is it true you killed three Akatsuki?" The belligerent girl said, eyes wide and feverish in their excitement, and Sakura blinked.

"I suppose, though Kakuzu was more like putting a dying animal out of its misery. I'm also not sure how you know that, to be honest."

"Aiko-chan don't be modest!" The boy cried, throwing an arm in the direction of her shoulders that Sakura smoothly sidestepped.

"Everyone knows about the pink haired Konoha girl that killed so many Akatsuki they put a fifty million ryo bounty on her head!"

"They do?" Sakura asked, looking around at the strange glances she was getting in a new light.

"They call you the Boiler." The professional one added unhelpfully. Sakura grimaced.

"Not the prettiest nickname."

"Why do they call you the Boiler?" The belligerent girl asked.

"Aah. My nature transformation sort of... boils flesh if I pump a lot of it into a person at once." Sakura said, the boy looked a little green whilst the belligerent one became even more excited. The professional was completely impassive. "Sorry, but I don't think I caught your names?"

“Well, of course you know mine thi-”

“Do I?”

“I just told you!”

“I must have forgotten, shinobi-san. My apologies.”

“It’s Omoi! Don’t forget it!” He was becoming increasingly more agitated. Sakura smiled innocently.

“Strange name for an idiot.” She said, the belligerent one started laughing.

“I’m Karui! Please to meet’cha!”

“Samui.” Added the professional one.

“Wanna come back to our tent and play a few rounds of cards?” Belligerent one asked. Sakura smiled.

“Sounds like fun.”

And that’s how Sakura ended up spending the night among the Kumogakure forces. She wasn’t sure what she was expecting but the reality was surprisingly pleasant. Rather than the anger and outright disgust the Raikage had shown- she asked a few subtle questions and found out that was apparently just the default of his personality- most of the Kumo-nin seemed to view her as a sort of fun ghost story to scare the newbies with.

She also made a rather significant amount of money by betting on and showing off her signature manipulation and stealth abilities.

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Sakura stood at the front of the division ranks, her hair tied up in practical braids and flak jacket securely fitted over practical shinobi blacks. The ‘shinobi’ hitai-ate was positioned across her forehead and she stared solemnly up at the five figures on top of the cliffside.

A member of division three, under Hatake, they were going to be positioned directly on the frontlines, with the job of stopping the enemy’s approach over the land. The division was filled with close/midrange fighters, lots of heavy hitting ninjutsu users and Taijutsu specialists with a focus on speed.

Immediately to her left stood Maito (a given to place with Hatake) followed by Lee (a given to place with Maito). Sakura couldn't help but notice the giant green man was looking distinctly pale.

The Kazekage begun giving what was likely a very motivating and rousing speech. Sakura wouldn't know as she was distracted by Maito collapsing next to her.

"Gai!" Lee cried, clutching the man's shoulders and wailing, effectively blocking the medic who'd pushed through the formation to treat the man. Sakura poked Maito's face with a shoe.

"You alright?" She asked. The man abruptly burped and sprung back up to standing- taking with him a Lee that was still clutching at his shoulders and crying- a brilliant smile on his face and a thumbs up thrown.

"I have never been better! I was simply momentarily overcome by the sheer brilliance of youth surrounding us!" He thanked the medic- who returned to their position with an extremely dazed look on their face- and stepped back into place. Sakura patted a patch of the man's shoulder that didn't carry a crying Lee and smiled reassuringly. Or at least she hoped that was what appeared on her face.

"So long as you're okay."

And then they were moving, advancing into their positions and headed towards the enemy.

A feral smile twitched at the edges of Sakura's face.

The Seven Swordsmen

Chapter Summary

Sakura was excited for the war but your enemies all being made of paper rather than blood, bone and guts really took a lot of the fun out of killing them.

Chapter Notes

Prewarning, the fourth shinobi war chapters will probably be disjointed if you're not super familiar with the arc. There are several big chunks that I miss and I focus a lot more on the action rather than the political stuff that's happening behind the scenes but it's honestly not super important. Sakura's mindset at any one point in time is basically 'this is who I have to seal/kill'. She's not interested in the wider strategical decisions and ideological manoeuvring and her POV reflects that.

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Sakura threw herself forward alongside Hatake, Maito and Lee. Kusanagi was drawn and the senbon was blocked, the black eyes set in Momochi's accomplice's face staring at her from the other side of the clashed weapons.

"Sakura-chan?" The gender ambiguous kid said. She was miffed to realise they were still a tiny bit taller than her. She scowled.

"Kakashi-san, you saved us!" New Kid cried, naked relief in his voice.

"It's a little early to be celebrating, all of these guys are extremely dangerous."

"I knew I'd be fighting someone but I didn't know it'd end up being you, Kakashi." Momochi said. "I should've been sent to hell after you finished me on that bridge. Next thing I know I'm standing next to Haku and I thought something was off. I guess this really isn't heaven."

"No this is the real world. And none of you belong here." Hatake confirmed.

Momochi and the Accomplice's face's grew troubled. "Kakashi please," Momochi said even as he released a monstrous amount of killing

intent. “Stop us.”

Hatake made a hand sign and they leapt back to their main forces, the other three carrying an ambush squad member as they did.

“Don’t hold back. Stop me. Whatever it takes, I’m already dead. My humanity is dead.” Momochi said and the killing intent he was releasing doubled.

Hatake pushed up the brim of his hitai-ate.

“General Kakashi, the man from the hidden stone has a bloodline limit, blast element. He’s Gari, a former member of the blasting corps! And the woman is Pakura she uses the sand village’s scorching element, please be careful!”

The mist rolled in.

“Nothing but bloodline limits.” Hatake said. “Group the battle squadrons around the sensor ninjas! Everyone else cover them from 3, 6, 9 and 12 o’clock in a Manji formation! Zabuza can detect his targets through sound alone!”

“Thickening fog, visibility getting worse by the second, this must be the hidden mist technique.” Said Maito at Sakura’s back.

“Watch your backs, last time he went for this formation’s only blind spot, the centre.” Sakura said.

She grimaced. The number of allies made this difficult. With less people she could pinpoint the enemies movement by sound and use stealth techniques to attack them, but with this large a battalion it was almost impossible to track single individuals. She was just as likely to attack an ally than an enemy.

Screams rang out from next to them, a formation going down to the combined efforts of Zabuza and Haku. Pakura and Gari attacking the far sides of their advance.

Zabuza turned, heading to back up Pakura whilst Haku headed towards Gari. Kakashi and Sakura rushed after Zabuza whilst the green pair headed for Haku.

Kakashi blocked Zabuza’s kunai and Sakura moved in with a swipe of her chokutō, forcing Zabuza to duck backwards. They worked as a pair, one ducking in just as the other finished attacking, keeping

Zabuza on the defensive and preventing him from gaining any ground. Sakura knew Kakashi was focused on the war as a whole, developing strategies to work around the four enemies rather than just the individual battle, so she worked harder than usual to cover his openings.

Then, Pakura and Gari member disappeared behind the others, Zabuza soon disengaging entirely to join them. Sakura and Hatake settled back into the ranks. A sense of foreboding pressing the oxygen from the air. The mist thinned to reveal six coffins, out of which stepped six intimidating figures.

“The last generation of the seven swordsmen of the hidden mist!”

Momochi lifted a half-broken Kubikiribōchō.

“Is team Ensui ready yet?” Hatake asked.

“Almost...”

“Maki from the sand, what about you?”

“Ready and waiting!”

“Hit them all at once! Buy as much time as possible!”

The shinobi launched an attack, a massive volley of kunai and shuriken and ninjutsu hitting the seven figures. They deflected the majority of them in a flashing of movement, the rest passing through them only for any damage to simply reform as if it never happened.

Edo tensei. Unlimited chakra. Unable to be injured. The only way to stop them was to bind their movements or seal their souls.

The middle one pulled out a massive scroll, unsealing it to give four of them their legendary swords. Five out of seven of the legendary swordsmen now had the swords. Sakura grinned.

“The fog’s getting thicker, I can’t see a thing. And with their silent killing techniques we can’t use our ears either!”

“We need to do something about the mist first or the army will be in pretty bad shape.”

“General Kakashi! The shadow mimic is complete!”

“Good! Ensui loosen the binding and let me move as I want!” Hatake

said, moving through the hand signs for a Chidori. “Yamanaka Santa you’ll use the mind-body switch and trade places with me. Use your sensing abilities to locate the enemy and get my body as close as possible, preferably behind them. We’ll hit Zabuza first, as soon as you detect him, release the technique and send me back to my body. And I’ll fight him so that our shadows converge! The moment I do that, Ensui, you combine the shadow stitch with the shadow mimic, raise the power and bind him completely! Maki will rush in and immobilise Zabuza completely with the cloth binding techniques.

“Sakura, you’ll shadow me with your full amount of stealth. Cover my back if something goes wrong.”

“Understood, taicho.” Sakura said, echoed by the affirmatives of those behind them.

“Let’s roll.” Hatake said, sprinting forward as he was overtaken by the mind body switch jutsu. Sakura dropped her signature to nothing and settled into the familiar glassy feeling of the transparency jutsu, melting into the mist and padding along silently behind the man.

Momochi was attacking the left flank with a now surprisingly whole Kubikiribōchō. Apparently the sword could regenerate itself. They moved around him, Hatake returning to his body to streak towards the enemy’s back with a Chidori, the accomplice streaking into his path and getting hit with it instead.

Haku grabbed Kakashi’s arm to hold him in place. Zabuza twisted to swing and hit him through the kid but Sakura’s sword was already slicing through Zabuza’s arms, sending the massive cleaver crashing to the ground. She shoved Kusanagi through the dead man’s chest from behind for good measure as Kakashi stepped forward, connecting the shadows.

“ENSUI NOW!” Hatake roared and Momochi was bound by the shadow possession. Sakura and Hatake both leapt away from the bodies. “Now Maki!”

The woman rushed in, immobilising the pair in cloth and taking them into the back lines.

The mist cleared. Three of the swordsmen were before them; the fat one, one with lightning down their blades and the very skinny one.

“I’ll take lightning.” Sakura offered. A Shinobi from behind her stepped forward.

“That’s the boltsword ‘fang’ and it’s wielder Ringo Ameyuri! They channel a massive amount of lightning energy down their blades, one hit and your dead!” He said. Sakura turned and smiled.

“Don’t worry, those kinds of rules don’t apply to me.”

“Right, Sakura will deal with the lightning wielder, Maki back her up, we’ll work on holding off the others until she’s sealed.”

“Understood.” Sakura said and Hatake leaped towards the enemies, Kubikiribōchō in hand and shouting orders at the surrounding shinobi. Sakura looked at Maki. “Stay behind me. When I give the signal, you immobilise her.” The sand-nin nodded and Sakura leapt into the fray.

She blocked the swing of the twin swords moments before they hit an ally, Sakura’s feet firmly planted as she channeled the lightning chakra down Kusanagi and into the ground. It was a little more difficult with shoes on, to the point she wouldn’t be able to focus enough to keep her storm transformation circling so she had to fight without it’s benefits, but she would manage.

Kusanagi did not slice through the swords, unfortunately, but Sakura hadn’t really been expecting it to. If the swords were the kind that could be sliced through without ridiculous amounts of chakra involved then they wouldn’t be legendary.

The lightning wielder’s eyes widened in surprise and she disengaged, leaping backwards before coming at Sakura from a different angle. Entire body thrown into a spin as she attempted to break through Sakura’s defences.

Sakura ducked one blade and caught the other with her own, sending lightning down one leg and into the ground as the other smashed into the woman’s stomach with a pulse of pressurised chakra, sending her flying back and ripping her stomach to pieces.

The residual buzz of the lightning trailed through Sakura’s chakra channels, something she could feel as other in her system. Curious, Sakura flickered her signature to match the woman’s and she felt the lingering energy merge seamlessly into and energise her own.

Interesting.

Sakura launched after the woman, keeping Maki behind her as she ducked another swipe of blades and blocked another, this time keeping her signature identical to the dead body’s and circulating the

lightning. Letting it build up with each hit and push Sakura faster and faster. The dead Kiri-nin moved not unlike a Hyuuga with swords, her fighting style based on her lightning becoming a combination of defence and attack. She would form a circle of power that would be impossible to get through at the same time it would smash through almost any defence.

Once Sakura crippled her ability to do such her swords became just swords with weird points on them. The woman was still a difficult opponent, her kenjutsu beyond Sakura's own abilities, but the more she absorbed the lightning the faster she became and the more Sakura outstripped the Edo tensei.

She weaved and dodged around the woman, moving in to clash swords and moving back out again in the natural rhythm of a fight. She kept enough attention on her surroundings to ensure there were no immediate threats to herself or Maki but for the most part she focused on the woman. Hatake would keep the others off their backs. With every clash she gained ground. Every passing minute she found another foothold.

Sakura watched and fought until she spotted an opening, the enemy jumping backwards off a rise and giving Sakura just enough room to slice behind her guard, cutting off the woman's hands. At the same time Sakura pulled a kunai from her pouch, channeled all of the built up lightning chakra into it and slammed it into the dead woman's chest.

The Edo tensei shook, racked with a seizure from the lightning and temporarily frozen in place.

"Now Maki!" Sakura said and the woman jumped out from behind her, wrapping the lightning riddled body in nonconductive cloth. It was taken to the back lines and Sakura looked around at the battlefield.

Somehow, Hatake and New Kid had managed to seal the fat one during the fight, the battalion now working together to fight the tall one. The sun was significantly lower in the sky. It would be dark soon. Sakura watched the fight with keen eyes, taking the opportunity to recover her breath and observe how the tall one fought before jumping into the fray.

"Are you going to take the swords?" A shinobi Sakura vaguely remembered from hanging out with the Kumogakure group asked.

“No.” She shook her head. “I have Kusanagi.” She gestured to her sheathed chokutō with a thumb. “And I don’t have the chakra reserves to handle them, anyway.”

“Don’t mind if I do, then.” The man said, grin shark like. Sakura snorted good-naturedly.

She pulled her nature transformation around her and headed into the battle.

The tall one used a sword shaped like a needle and what looked like a massive spool of ninja wire to move through masses of people and ‘stitch’ them together, following that up by using the groups of bodies as battering rams to break through peoples defences and ‘stitch’ the next group. At the same time he was carefully surrounding parties with ninja wire, using it as seamlessly as if it were an extension of his own body.

Sakura watched as a loop of wire threatened to behead an oblivious shinobi and threw a kunai at the string, expecting it to slice through. Instead- though it did knock the loop off course- the kunai glanced off the metal wire and it continued to behead the shinobi. Likely much more painfully than it would have been due to Sakura’s interference.

She sighed. It would have to be shuriken, then.

Sakura was very, very good with shuriken. It was essentially a basic requirement for being a shinobi. But she was no Uchiha. This would be difficult.

She jumped forward and used Kusanagi to knock aside the flying sword from where it had been about to skewer a pair of the cannon fodder. The tall man pulled in the string and the sword whipped back to his hand, grabbing just in time to deflect a blow from Kubikiribōchō.

Sakura moved forward as Kakashi tried to drive the man back, adding in to his efforts and pushing the tall man back towards a gap in between two sections of rubble. They moved in tandem, blocking whilst one attacked, dodging whilst the other boxed him in and the man was forced ever so slowly backwards, one step at a time.

It was when he was at the mouth of the gap that things started to go wrong.

The man, rather than retreat inwards or upwards, took Kubikiribōchō

to the chest and pulled the string taut. Sakura had already launched a trio of shuriken at the line of string, two catching and slamming it into the ground, but she could tell it wasn't going to hold. Kakashi was committed entirely to the swing, an effort to force the enemy back completely. She grabbed his elbow and started covering his chakra in preparation to flicker them, despite the massive drain it would cost her reserves and possible internal bleeding.

Fortunately, just before the shuriken were pulled out of the ground and they were both either decapitated or Sakura potentially killed herself over a stupid mistake, two green blurs descended from the sky. Lee landed on her shuriken, pinning the wire into the ground and ensuring the tall man's efforts were fruitless.

Gai appeared above the enemy, smashing a leg into his chest and throwing him into the gap.

"Now!" Yelled Kakashi and two teams of cannon fodder slammed their hands on either side of the rock, the walls closing in on the tall man and opening again to reveal a cocoon of stone. "Maki!"

The Suna woman swooped in in a twirl of cloth and covered the stone, wrapping sealing paper around the lump.

"Thank you both." Sakura said with a sigh of relief, sheathing Kusanagi and sweeping keen eyes over the battlefield. It was a minefield of smashed rocks and broken trees, the ground almost unrecognisable from when they had started, littered with bodies and injured cannon fodder alike.

Sakura... was not enjoying this. The fighting was fun to a point, she liked working with Hatake, but there was no satisfaction in it. The enemies didn't die. It was like crushing endless paper dolls. There was none of the visceral gratification of gore and violence.

It was simply never ending nonsense.

Night had fallen. The moon was almost full. It bathed the bloody ground in a beautiful silver light. It was making her nostalgic for some of her favourite ANBU missions.

"The scorching element and blast element users have been sealed. The others appear to have retreated." Maito said.

"They withdrew?" Hatake said incredulously. "They're hardly a traditional army, it's not like they need to sleep."

“Someone is controlling the edo tensei, they probably have human needs.” Sakura pointed out. “Though they could simply be regrouping for a more focused attack.”

“We’ll regroup, reaffirm the line and set up a watch.” Hatake said and they nodded, the useful members moving straight to obey whilst the cannon fodder mostly seemed to be milling about and looking shellshocked.

Sakura spared a short moment to wonder what an average chūnin’s mission schedule was like, to make the sight of a massacre so shocking to them. Then, she followed Hatake back to the central point of the battalion.

Hopefully she might get some sleep that night.

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Sakura did not get any sleep that night.

The three remaining edo tensei had switched to guerrilla tactics with the coming of the night, hitting a weak point in their defences and causing as much damage as possible before they would disappear. Always aiming for cannon fodder, going for numbers over quality of kills.

Sakura didn’t even see one of them the entire night, but she had ended up patrolling along the line to try and prevent the attacks, and they managed to slow them by placing someone relatively threatening every two hundred metres or so.

The night was long and filled with endless, pointless chasing of unkillable targets. At least it gave her reserves plenty of time to recover.

When dawn broke and a massive explosion broke the line, Sakura was almost relieved.

She made it to the site of the explosions to see a man with a terrible beard wielding a sword covered in a seemingly endless amount of explosion tags. He was mowing through the forces like a madman through butter, exploding the cannon fodder with ease. He was the only edo tensei here.

Sakura concentrated on her hearing a bit. And there were the two others. She should not expect backup.

Her eyes traced over the available shinobi.

“You!” She yelled, pointing at a group of eight allies, they jolted and looked up at her. “Throw everything you have at him! Kunai, shuriken, rocks, ninjutsu! I don’t care! Just slow him down! Spread around the place so he can’t kill you all at once! Tell everyone you come across to do the same and that any earth users should do their best to fuck up his footing!” They scrambled to obey, running in separate directions and spreading the orders among the living members of the defence.

“And you!” She pointed at a guy carrying large scrolls of cloth. “Can you seal him?!”

“Yes Ma’am!”

“Right! I’m going to pin him down, wait for my signal!” The man nodded and she jumped into action, forcing her nature transformation into overdrive.

Her thoughts were whirling as she leapt towards him, watching the sword swing and the symbols on the explosive tags. She sprinted and ducked under the blade, avoiding touching it completely, and it swung back around almost instantly, the sharp edge once again being aimed for her.

There was no explosion.

She blocked the edge with a kunai and the man instantly leapt away, Sakura watching with wide eye as a trio of tags detached themselves from the sword, glowing brightly. She flickered away just as the tags exploded.

“Alright.” She hummed, forcing her storm chakra to speed up once again and throwing herself at the terribly bearded man.

Sakura got through three swings of the blade, not managing to land a hit in return, before she was forced to flicker away again. The man wasn’t that fast on his feet, unable to keep up with her when she backed away, but his arms were monstrously strong and he was able to halt and change the direction of his swings in a heartbeat. It made avoiding the weapon, and hence the explosions, whilst getting close enough to deal damage almost impossible.

She threw herself back into the fray, this time noticing with some satisfaction some weapons were being thrown, forcing the guy to

either take the hits and slow down from the damage or dodge them and slow down the swings towards her. The man mostly chose to dodge, and as a result Sakura managed to get in a palm to the ribs, sending him skidding backwards as his chest was blown out.

She tried to sweep under his guard and get in a hit to his arm, but the man switched the directions of his swing at the last second, forcing Sakura to block the blade with a kunai and flicker backwards again when the explosive tags were set off. The arm that had been forced to block was aching. The man's monstrous strength threatened to dislocate a limb if she wasn't careful.

She pushed back on the offensive. Her nature transformation spinning faster and faster. It was a mixed blessing with this guy. On the one hand, she became continuously faster the longer she wasn't forced to use a body flicker which meant she could avoid more hits, but on the other the guy was extremely adept at reading her movements. The longer she spent fighting him the harder he became to fight, she was getting faster but he seemed to be getting smarter at an even faster rate.

She had been forced to flicker four more times. He definitely understood the nature of her technique by now. Sakura pushed the storm chakra around her in dizzying blurs as she leapt back in. She had a plan, but she needed one of the cannon fodder to pull through. Right now the man was being mildly annoyed by the rain of weaponry rather than actually inconvenienced at all.

Sakura couldn't step back to take the time to try out another approach without him turning to continue killing the cannon fodder and hence potentially losing them the war (because for all that the cannon fodder were mostly useless against the extremely heavy hitters they've been pinned with, there was a reason they'd been brought to this war, there were purposes they would serve) and she couldn't gain any ground until someone got lucky and made an opening for her.

Right now all she could do was make herself suitably dangerous enough to absorb the guy's full attention whilst being as economical with her chakra and energy use as possible. Maybe useful reinforcements would eventually arrive.

Dodge. Dodge. Swing. Dodge. Roll. Flicker.

Swipe. Duck. Dodge. Dodge. Dodge. Duck. Flicker.

Roll. Swing. Flicker.

Dodge. Duck. Duck. Jump. Dodge. Dodge. Swipe. Dodge. Dodge. Duck. Flicker.

Swing. Roll. Dodge. Duck. THERE!

The ground shifted under the edo tensei at the same time a volley of flaming kunai flung themselves at his back and he stumbled, arm swinging slightly too wide. Sakura wasted no time flickering behind the man and slashing his arm off with Kusanagi, taking the rest of his limbs as well. Just to be sure.

Sakura grabbed the collar of the limbless body and threw it at the hiding Suna-nin. "NOW!" She yelled and the guy popped out from behind the rock, throwing sheets of cloth over the limbless lump and wrapping sealing tags around the resulting bundle. The limbs crumbled into paper confetti.

She was pleasantly surprised. Those attacks had been coordinated!

The cannon fodder had just been mentally upgraded to mildly useless genin in her mind. "Great work everyone!" She yelled with an overblown smile and there was enthusiastic cheering. Apparently their coordination had been some kind of extremely dramatic quest for them, rather than just a basic tenant of teamwork.

Ah, well. They can't all be jōnin.

"Get that body to the backlines, everyone else regroup and reform our positions, I'm going to go and help the other fight!" She ordered and they scrambled to obey, giving her a pang of nostalgia for Team Ro.

Sakura locked that down before she could get anymore needlessly sentimental and sprinted in the direction of the noises of a fight.

She arrived to see one enemy sealed and being carried away by cannon fodder and the other enemy fending off the combined efforts of Hatake and Maito. Lee was nowhere to be seen, which was probably not a good sign for his physical wellbeing, though judging by Maito's composure the small green one probably wasn't dead.

Sakura's eyes narrowed on the last remaining swordsman, watching his body turn into water with each hit and the man simply melt through the attacks. Hatake and Maito were trying to pin him down with a team of earth users, which would follow the logic of the nature transformation's weakness structures. Sakura, however, had seen this before.

“HE’S WEAK TO LIGHTNING!” She yelled and they nodded affirmation, Sakura watched as Hatake sped through the hand signs for a Chidori.

He only got through half of them before a lightning wreathed blade was poking out of water-boy’s chest and pinning him in place. The Kumo-nin that’d taken the twin lightning blades having managed to sneak up on the enemy.

The enemy was sealed and the living mildly useless genin cheered. Sakura hopped down next to Hatake and Maito.

“Is that all of them?” She asked.

“You got the one making the explosions?” Hatake said and she nodded. “Then yeah. That’s all of them.” A gloved hand came up to tiredly ruffle her hair.

“Now what?”

“Now! We back up Naruto!” Maito declared before taking off in a blur of green. Hatake and Sakura followed.

The Danger of Cults

Chapter Summary

Their enemy may be a horribly overpowered insane person pumped full of warped idealist bullshit but at least he's not made of never-ending paper.

But apparently the even stronger Madara is. Dammit.

They crashed down onto the eight tails in a blur of green and silver and pink. Hatake grabbing Uzumaki whilst Sakura swept low with Kusanagi and Maito swept high with a powerful kick. The man became intangible and avoided their attacks, but he also avoided getting his hands on their jinchūriki, which was good.

Whilst the two men decided to be melodramatic and make a showing of their supreme coolness, Sakura used a kunai and a few well placed hits to break away the rock covering the glowing Uzumaki's back. She did not find it surprising that he'd found a way to make himself a neon orange nightlight.

"Kakashi-sensei! Bushy-brows-sensei! Sakura-chan! You're here!!" Uzumaki cried.

"I can't be sitting around while one of my Team Seven students is overdoing it out here!" Hatake said cheerfully over his shoulder.

"Ah wait!

That guy has a Sharingan and a Rinnegan in his left and right eyes-!"

Naruto was babbling at high speed, but Sakura'd spent enough time around him to decode the slurred words. She sighed, there went any hope of using stealth.

"And there's this stake in the left side of his chest and... uhhhhh!"

"Calm down, you aren't making any sense."

"His right eye is a Sharingan, and his left eye is a Rinnegan. There's the same kind of stake in his left breast that Pain had... I see." Hatake explained.

"He must be using a ridiculous amount of chakra to control bijuu's." Sakura added.

“That’s my Kakashi! Sharp as always!” Maito said at the same time.

“Five tails! It’s the five tails!” Hatake cried as massive, booming hooves stampeded towards them. Sakura watched the oncoming giant horse and readied a punch. Fortunately she didn’t need it. The masked man himself forced the bijuu to stop.

...Had the bijuu been aiming for him in the first place?

“Or maybe he doesn’t have complete control of the bijuu’s.” Sakura mused.

The transformed tailed beasts rushed towards them

“First we need to see which one’s going to use which one of Pein’s techniques!”

Sakura powered up her storm chakra, deciding not to draw Kusanagi in favour of heavy hitting.

“I’m not good with faces, they all look the same to me!” Gai yelled and Sakura laughed hysterically as the three of them met the tailed beast’s head on. Every one of them an almost identical mass of black if not for the number of tails they sprouted.

She met a black shape with a slam of a fist, pressurised chakra sending it flying as she threw herself towards a second one, slamming a palm into it’s back. She went for a kick but was knocked backwards by a slam of a tail, skidding along the ground alongside Kakashi and Gai. She just got a her arms up in time to block and they throbbed with fresh bruising. They’d been thrown away from Naruto and the eight tails, the group now separated by the half transformed bijuu.

“Why aren’t they using Pein’s abilities?!” Maito yelled.

“Maybe they can’t?” Hatake said.

“So he knows that we’ve already developed strategies to counter all of Pein’s abilities and isn’t stupid enough to waste chakra on something like that!” Maito said.

“Because controlling the bijuu’s with his doujutsu is already using a hefty amount of chakra!” Sakura finished.

“You guys are so smart!” Screamed the Uzumaki from where he was being attacked by a pair of tailed beasts.

“...Hatake Kakashi.” The masked man said. “Excellent eye. And you’ve taught your student well. Now, excuse me while I try and act a bit tough.”

A transformed jinchūriki screamed. The earth exploded beneath them as the six tails burst into its giant, terrifying glory. Then it exploded again as the four tails burst into being behind it.

Sakura bounced along the ground after being thrown back by the impacts, doing her best to protect anything important as she rolled before she managed to get her feet under herself and pushed up to standing.

The three of them and Naruto and the eight tails had effectively been separated, each facing a fully transformed tailed beast. The five tails moved in a flurry and they were faced with a shimmering opaque wall of gas.

“What the?!” Gai screamed.

“Don’t make contact with it!” Kakashi roared and they jumped backwards and away from it.

“If I can get a line of sight on the bijuu I could probably injure it!” She yelled.

“Probably?!” Yelled Gai.

“They’ve pinned us down!” Kakashi interrupted and they looked behind them to see the transformed jinchūriki’s arms sticking out of the ground behind them.

“The tree disintegrated! A rotting gas!”

A second Kakashi poofed into existence, the two of them moving behind them to form a manji formation.

“Here’s the plan!” Kakashi said. “Me and Gai focus on the enemies in front and leave our backs to each other! Sakura takes the first opportunity to do some damage! Any objections?!”

“None!” Gai said and Sakura echoed the cry.

Then Gai and Kakashi were moving. Sakura could hear the crackling of lightning at her back but didn’t pay it any further attention, instead drawing Kusanagi and watching Gai successfully punch away the gas.

Sakura drew her chakra into the tip of her sword, mixing the three elements in a perfect ratio.

One blizzard senbon took four percent of her chakra. Against a bijuu? She could afford to make ten.

She landed next to Gai just as he threw his last punch, a circle of ten rapidly spinning, hair thin shards of crackling ice forming at the tip of her sword as she pointed it at sight of the massive creature. The circle itself beginning to spin until it appeared just a solid cylinder of blue.

The last of the gas parted. Sakura aimed, braced herself, and released the jutsu. The cylinder of blue light exploded forwards. She was sent skidding back a few metres from the force.

It hit the bijuu at the top of its chest and blew a hole the size of its mountainous head in the creature. It screamed horribly, throwing its head back and stumbling wildly. The earth shook with every step, the ground cracking and shifting.

Sakura panted through the sudden loss of chakra, unable to help it as an exhilarated laugh slipped past her lips. The three of them stepped back into loose formation, Kakashi having popped his shadow clone in a not-good showing of his available chakra levels. The Bijuu was ignoring them completely in favour of curling into a ball and whimpering, but the ones behind them were gearing up for more.

“Holy shit!” Sakura exclaimed, laughing wildly. “I hurt a bijuu!” A gloved hand ruffled her hair.

“We’re not done yet!” Gai said, staring at the transformed jinchūriki crawling from the ground behind them.

Then, the bijuu fighting Naruto was sucked into the head of a nightmare creature that rose from the ground. The masked man standing on top.

“You only stopped two beasts, and it looks like you’re all on death’s door. But I don’t intend to be stingy here.” The man said, holding a hand seal before his face. “You have some very valuable things that belong to me, now I’m going to take them all.”

The ground before them exploded. The remaining four bijuu’s transformed. Four giant, mountain sized balls of death formed in front of their mouths.

“TH-THIS IS REALLY BAD!” Gai yelled.

“WATCH YOUR STEP GAI!” Kakashi yelled back. “I’M GOING TO USE KAMUI TO WIPE THEM ALL OUT!”

The seal between her collarbones started itching and burning. She ignored it.

“There’s no way you have enough strength for that!” Gai replied.
“There’s no choice, I’ve got to use the eighth gate.”

“BOTH OF YOU SHUT UP AND LET ME DEAL WITH IT!” Sakura screamed, throwing her hands up and feeling the sheer, unadulterated power of the seal on her forehead spread over her limbs. She began pushing chakra in to the tips of her fingers.

Then, a burst of speed. A blur of orange. The giant balls of death were effortlessly deflected. In her shock, the power slipped back inside the seal.

“Naruto?!” She exclaimed at the same time Hatake exclaimed “Sensei?!”

“I-is it Naruto?!” Maito yelled. Around them four massive chunks of land were wiped off the map. “Is this the power of a bijuu?!”

“The mountains...”

“This power scaling is totally ridiculous.” Sakura murmured.

“Here they come!” Maito yelled. The bijuu leaped. Warm, orange chakra enveloped them. “What is this?”

“Are we inside the nine tails chakra?”

“This is insane!” Sakura said. It was like floating in a warm bath of orange soft drink, except she was entirely submerged, not sticky and somehow magically breathing normally. Sakura was then largely distracted from the giant monster fight they were being taken along for by the insistent burning in her collarbone seal. It seemed to buzz and hum with impatience. “What the fuck do you want?” She muttered waving her hands in frustration.

The seal grew abruptly cooler and then hotter again as she did. Narrowing her eyes, Sakura waved her arm slowly, playing hot and cold with it’s placement until the seal was happy. When she looked,

her arm was pointing at Hatake.

“Right you want something from Hatake.” She murmured, loosely aware they’d been thrown backwards over a forest. It burned angrily in response. “Okay that’s a no. If you don’t want something from him... you want to do something for him?” The seal cooled happily. Her eyes widened. “You want me to give him you? What the fuck?” It somehow radiated approval.

Apparently her own probably-the-consciousness-of-a-past-life-containing-seal wanted to jump ship. Figured.

Sakura narrowed her eyes with concentration and- deciding just to roll with the soft drink bath theory- made swimming motions in the direction of Hatake. Amazingly, it worked.

She moved toward him, bumping into the man and causing him to jolt and look away from the probably pretty cool giant monster fight. She grabbed his shoulders and twisted him to face her, pushing him down a little as well so that his forehead was at eye level.

“Wha-?” He started but she interrupted him.

“Sorry, sensei, I know there’s a cool fight happening and all, but Tristan’s really insistent on going to you.” She pushed his hitai-ate up and felt the seal gather eagerly on her forefinger. She looked at it. “Eager little bastard.” She muttered and pushed the finger onto the forehead above a very confused pair of eyes.

A white-hot flash of agony hit her, a bitten of scream choking past her lips as she clutched at the fabric above a burning collarbone. As quickly as it started it ended and she was blinking back tears and untwisting her hand.

“Are you alright?” Hatake sounded panicky and confused. She felt that was reasonable. Sakura, herself, was feeling a bit panicky and confused. “Did you...?” He touched his forehead, now sporting a purple diamond that he couldn’t see but could very likely feel in his chakra network, his own eyes horrified as they flickered up to her forehead. She shook her head and pushed up her hitai-ate, revealing the purple diamond there and he relaxed a little.

“That,” She pointed at the man’s diamond. “Is sort of a...” Her expression twisted. “Friend. I saw when I died. He became suddenly very insistent on going to you.”

Hatake's expression softened before becoming very, very complicated. Had he seen someone when he died?

Sakura would likely never know.

The world was exploded again. Naruto was screaming.

Kakashi pushed back down both their hitai-ates just in time for the soft drink bath to suddenly disappear. Sakura, having been kind of horizontal from her attempts to get to him, threatened to fall flat on her face from the drop but he caught her with an arm around her waist. Setting her on the ground and steadying her with a hand on her shoulder.

Sakura turned to face the nightmare statue.

"I can't believe he'd be able to completely control the nine tails as well." The masked man mused, voice carrying over the empty ground. "Although, it looks like he won't last long. This changes nothing."

"Things have changed!" Uzumaki argued. "Because I just learned a whole bunch of difficult names at once!"

"What the fuck." Sakura whispered emphatically.

"Difficult names?" Masked man asked. "What are you talking about?"

"Ahahah." Uzumaki teased. "You don't know them, do you?!" He stuck his tongue out at the guy. "I'm not going to tell you."

"Seeing Naruto having grown this much makes me feel really old." Maito said.

"...What's the matter? This isn't like you!" Hatake exclaimed, his voice alarmed as he turned to look at the green man. "It may sound weird coming from me but, let's just agree our springtimes of youth aren't over yet! The fact that we're here means..."

"Don't say anything more! You'll make me even sadder!"

"Now that's the guy I know."

Sakura was bewildered. She did not understand rivalries.

Rain began to fall.

"This war will make all pasts, all futures, all existences completely

irrelevant.”

The nightmare head rose out of the ground, a giant gangly body prying itself from the earth’s depths like the very devil itself clawing it’s way out of hell. A foul, overpowering chakra filled the air. It seeped into Sakura’s bones like rot, bile rising in her throat.

Kakashi and Gai raced forward in unison, each wordlessly going for an arm in demonstration of their many, many years of working together.

Sakura huffed and jumped forward herself. The eight tails jinchūriki and Naruto were going for the chin so she collected her chakra in her fist and went for the stomach. Collected, pressurised and released at the perfect moment. Hitting in unison with an orange blur and a giant punch.

A tiny, almost unnoticeable crack appeared under her hit and the creature went flying backwards, crashing into the earth as Sakura landed and rolled, retreating back onto the eight tails.

“Oh well.” The masked man said. “I have no choice now.” He summoned a giant pot and a bottle.

“What’s that?!” Asked Hatake.

“I wanted to revive it in an intact, perfect form but even just a piece possesses the same power.” The pot and bottle flew into the nightmare creature’s mouth. All of it’s eyes opened at once and it pushed itself off the ground with a roar, the foul air around her seemed to double in its intensity. “It’s a bit late. But the promised time is here.

“Look closely and feel it in your skin! The ten tail’s has been revived! The beginning and end of this world!”

“I get it! So the Mazō is some kind of vessel of the ten tails!” Hatake said.

“What, the ten tails?!”

“Wait, what’s going on here? If what he said was true in the meeting than this war was all for the sake of gathering the chakra of the nine tails which was necessary for the revival of the ten tails! The eight tails and nine tails still have their chakra is this some kind of lie?”

“We always sling raps and screw up crap!

“He absorbed a bit of chakra from the octopus leg clone. I’m getting a little worry prone.” Sung B.

“The chakra from the octopus’ leg. Then it only needs to be a part of the beast?”

“Then was there nine tails chakra in that pot and bottle thing?!” Sakura asked.

“Everyone, listen.” The Uzumaki said with what was definitely not the Uzumaki’s voice.

“That voice...”

“The kid and the nine tails did a switcheroo!”

“Sakura is right. The pot and the bottle he had the Mazō eat were treasure’s the Grandpa Rikudō brought. They have the power to seal away anything. Whatever goes in never comes out, no matter what. And in the pot lied Kinaku, in the bottle lied Ginkaku. They were probably revived with the edo tensei, used in this war and then sealed inside.”

“Rikudō and the brothers Kinaku and Ginkaku. I’ve heard all of these names in legends, but what does that have to do with your chakra?”

“They once fought me. And I ate them! But afterwards they fed on the meat in my stomach and absorbed my chakra!”

“In other words Kinaku and Ginkaku each held a piece of your chakra and the masked man stole them as materials to use to revive the ten tails from Darui’s first squad. That matches the intel we received from HQ.”

“But that chakra along with the eight tails’ is only a piece. I don’t know what kind of form the ten tails will be revived in.”

“I’d like to do something before it’s revived, if possible.” Said Hatake.

“Kakashi, you always open your mouth so easily. No wonder you’ve lived a life of regret.” Said the masked man, an edge of emotion to his voice that made the comment sound personal. Sakura swore softly under her breath.

The likely hood of Uchiha Obito surviving being crushed half to death just rose substantially.

Damn.

“...just who are you?!” Demanded Maito.

“You don’t remember faces, so what’s the point in telling you.”
Suggesting Maito had, actually, known the masked man at one point in time.

Double damn.

“Kakashi, as you said, now is our only chance before the ten tails is revived. Grandpa Rikudō said that ten tail’s revival would signal the end of this world.” Said nine tails. “But if only a piece of the nine tails chakra and the eight tails is inside we won’t know until we try.”

“You’re misunderstanding.” The masked man said. “The ten tails’ revival doesn’t need to be perfect for my purposes. My goal is simply the great genjutsu, infinite tsukuyomi! To cast a genjutsu on every human being on this planet. To make the world one and free of anyone, no war, no peace, nothing but a perfect world. There lies truth in singular consciousness that has abandoned all individuality!

“This world no longer needs heroes like hope or future! If the ten tails is revived, even if it is incomplete, I’ll be able to use infinite tsukuyomi! And then reality will end. All that will exist is a single, never-ending dream!”

“I, had a father! And a mother! And Ero-sennin! All kid’s look up to heroes! That’s why I was able to keep running forwards without getting lost! I’m gonna become a Hokage that will beat out all previous generations!!” Uzumaki cried. “That’s my dream!! You idiot!!”

“Even if you never want your youth to end, at some point you have to stop dreaming!” Maito added.

“Yeah, dreams are things that come true.” Added Hatake.

“Dreams, dreams, dreams, dreams, lot’s of dreams! My dream is a middle aged woman chest! The turret you see when lots of dreams come true is the best!” The Kumo man sung.

“If you want to run away from your problems to live in a fantasy world then go and get high on opiates!” Sakura added, drawing herself up to her full (insignificant) height. “Leave the rest of us alone!”

“Individuality makes people blind to the truth.” The masked man muttered, like a cult member repeating a mantra. “My words, the words of no one. Are the words that will lead this world to truth.”

Uzumaki screamed, glowing orange again, and threw himself and a giant rasengan at the masked man. He blocked it with the gunbai, the weapon absorbing and then deflecting the chakra ball.

“Guess I really will have to bash in your mask first.”

“There’s something I cannot part with. I will not let you touch the Mazō!”

Naruto launched forward, closely followed by Gai and Sakura. Gai was welding nunchucks so Sakura made sure she gave the man a wide berth, swiping with Kusanagi when small opening’s appeared.

They were few, the pair fighting turning into a whirlwind and leaving her and Naruto behind, but Sakura managed a single, visible slice in a sleeve.

After two days of fighting paper, visible damage was extremely satisfying.

The battle waged on, the three of them throwing themselves after the masked man until Gai was separated by the debris, Sakura was slammed into by the gunbai and thrown through the air- the distinct feeling of her arm snapping forcing a number of curses from her mouth- and the masked man launched at Naruto. Kakashi jumped in to save him, a lightning charged kunai forcing the masked man to go intangible once more before he deflect the kunai with a foot, directly towards Naruto.

Kakashi got rid of it with Kamui, and Naruto punched.

There was a moment of stillness during which Sakura managed to control the wild fall through the air and right herself, pushing through the rubble to join the other three.

There was a single crack on the masked man’s mask.

“Hey Kakashi, did you see that?!” Maito called.

“Cracks appeared on his mask.” Hatake confirmed.

“Naruto’s attack must have hit him before he went intangible!” Maito

cried.

“You’re right, on the left side of the mask!” The Uzumaki proclaimed.

“No.” Sakura cut them off. “That was the dagger.” She turned to look at Hatake, her hand clutching her right arm still. “Kakashi, if they’re linked-”

The masked man slammed a glowing hand into the ground and a barrier rose up around the Mezō as eight tails tried to attack it.

“If the barrier’s been brought out, looks like we’ll just have to take out the masked guy first.”

“I’ve been aiming for his mask the whole time! Dammit!” Uzumaki cried.

Hatake’s hand landed on top of her head. “I really should pay more attention to your ramblings.” He muttered. “Gai, Naruto, B-san. There’s something I want to try. Help me out.” Then he was picking her up and running with the others to the eight tails, placing her on the creature’s head and heading for the hand.

“I can help!” She cried.

“Focus on your arm first.” Hatake rebuffed and disappeared. Sakura scowled and dug through her pack, keeping half an eye on the boys as they were thrown into the fight. She pulled out a scroll containing an emergency medical kit and unsealed it. A hand tore off the broken arm’s sleeve and then grabbed the elbow if it, shoving the wad of fabric in her mouth and screaming through it as she pulled her arm straight to somewhat set it.

A trio of metal poles was placed on the arm and stuck to the skin with her chakra and then it was all wrapped, her right bicep becoming a stiff layer of metal and bandages.

She tested the range of motion and grimaced. Her kenjutsu would be sloppy and her movement’s would be limited, but she could punch. She leapt towards the battle.

“Where did you get that eye?” Hatake hissed, a brittle undertone to his voice.

“Where, you ask?” The masked man said. “Hm, if I dare say, it was during the previous great war. The Battle of Kanabi Bridge, you

participated in this war hailed as the 'sharingan hero'."

"You're-?!"

"I've told you not to open your mouth so easily!" The masked man said and Sakura landed next to Uzumaki. "You've degraded to a man who's all words and no action. Your words have neither value or meaning!"

Sakura felt the protective edge to her *boil*. She snarled.

"It's too la-"

"What the fuck do you know?!" Sakura hissed, a flare of killing intent pulsing through the air and venom dripping from her voice. The masked man paused in his tirade. "People make mistakes, things go to shit, that's called *being human*. Good people learn from their mistakes and work their ass off like he has to live up to their values. You" She pointed at him, another flare of killing intent pulsing outwards. The Uchiha leant back unconsciously. "Are nothing more than a pathetic coward, running away from reality with his tail tucked between his legs." Her storm chakra rippled around her, cycling faster and faster. Naruto stepped up beside her.

"That's right!" He cried. "I don't really know what's going on, but we are Hatake Kakashi's students and I will be Hokage!"

"We will never let our comrades die!" Sakura echoed and they burst forward together, Naruto clad in orange and Sakura clad in electric blue.

Naruto smashed a giant, chakra created hand into the man and he stepped away from it, the world spinning before him as giant shuriken whirled out of his eye.

"You fools! You cannot defeat me!"

Sakura took her built up energy and flickered, slamming a chakra heightened palm into his lower back. Unfortunately, and against all of Sakura's expectations from using the move on others, he didn't explode in a wave of gore but the man was sent flying. The shuriken caught by the eight tails.

He turned in the air, a barrage of black stakes thrown out of his Sharingan and crashing around them. Sakura didn't have the momentum built up to flicker again, but she had chakra. She raised

her hands as Naruto formed a clone, forming a blizzard senbon and releasing, the blur of blue rushing through the air towards the man.

It didn't hit, but it forced him to stop with the stakes to become intangible, allowing Naruto's shadow clone to throw itself through the air and into the man's face with a rasengan. The clone was kamui'd away and Sakura smiled ferally. The original Naruto forming a bijuu bomb and forcing the masked man intangible entirely.

He landed on the ruined ground, mask smashed and lying around him in pieces. Sakura glanced at Hatake, saw the distraught expression on his face and she knew.

"Obito?!" His voice was shaky.

"Is that really Obito? Even though he's supposed to be dead?" Maito asked.

"There's no mistaking it, it's Uchiha Obito!"

"If you wish to call me by that name, then by all means go ahead. It no longer holds any meaning to me." The Uchiha said.

"So, you survived." Hatake said.

"Who is that?!" Uzumaki cried.

"Naruto, remember that time in Wave where you thought Sasuke died protecting you?" Sakura yelled and the orange boy nodded. "It's that, but Kakashi is you and the thought he died part was for two decades!"

Horrible, distraught understanding passed over Uzumaki's face.

"If you were alive, then why up until now..." Hatake said, wholly focused on the freshly unmasked Uchiha.

"Whether or not I survived is irrelevant. But of course if I had to say why," The man's face turned mean and Sakura pulled her lips back in a snarl. "It would be because you let Rin die. Don't get too hasty now. And you should stop making that face Kakashi."

"Aren't you going to blame me?"

"With this insignificant reality what good would blaming you do? I hold no interests in the affairs of this world that's about to disappear."

"BULLSHIT!" Sakura yelled and gave in to her anger. Purple lines

unravelling in burning tracks over her body and her storm chakra bled from circulating lines until her entire figure was wrapped in solid blue. She blurred out of existence and reappeared before the Uchiha, hand clamped tightly around his throat. "If you didn't care about who you were you wouldn't hide yourself behind a mask." He bled through her fingers but there were five, coin sized rings of melted fabric and flesh where they'd been and his face was twisted with pain.

She shoved her hand inside his intangible head, the covering of electric blue shifting and crackling around her.

"How long can you stay like that?" She asked, he jumped backwards but she moved with him, keeping her hand cupped around his intangible Rinnegan, her smile was hurting her cheeks. "Is it longer than I can maintain this?"

A hand clapped around her wrist. She twisted and kicked out, gritting her teeth the surge of pain in her arm as she did, her foot colliding and melting partway through a torso before she was tossed away. There was no blood, no gore, no bones. Just endless, unstoppable paper.

She was caught by an orange tail and set down next to Hatake and Maito. Her hand clutched her arm, and she seethed, panting on one knee as her mind raged.

"I'm surprised to see you struggling, Obito." Said the paper doll.

"Sakura are you-?" Hatake reached a hand out to her and she flinched away, holding up a finger as she focused on breathing.

She had a *lot* of chakra running through her at the moment. Losing concentration would mean she would quite literally explode.

Slowly, carefully, and with the full focus of her mind she tuned out her surroundings to sink the storm chakra back into her body, running it through her system and up into the seal. The blue slowly faded and the purple retreated. The rhombus itching uncomfortably against her skin. With a grimace, she pushed the hitai-ate up and into her hair, settling it against her braids.

It was less secure, but it let the burning heat of the rhombus cool a little against the night air. Sakura sighed in relief.

The Uzumaki was yelling.

“Are you okay?” Hatake asked as he helped her to her feet. She spat blood, ignoring the way her chakra tubes felt like they’d been scraped raw with steel wool to start recirculating her storm chakra and building up momentum. Apparently, forcing over a hundred times your reserves of chakra out of your body at once and then subsequently reabsorbing it wasn’t that great for your health.

Noted.

“I’ll live.” She said and steadied herself, pushing the hand on her arm away to stand firmly next to the trio of them, eyes fixed on the unmasked Uchiha and the paper doll. Sakura sniggered. An immortal Uchiha Madara with unlimited chakra. Her smile turned self deprecating and she glanced up at an increasingly concerned looking Hatake. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and someone will summon us the Shodaime.”

Four spears of black flew over their heads and crashed uselessly into a wall of chakra, the paper Uchiha now holding the gunbai with an annoyed expression on his face.

“Obito.” He said, completely ignoring the group of them to scold the unmasked asshole like a particularly wayward child. “Did you begin the plan without absorbing the eight and nine tails into the jutsu first? You were impatient Obito. Is that why you’ve also revived me in this way? What have you been doing up until now? What happened to Nagato? To revive me at the right timing with the Rinne Tensei Jutsu. That should have been the original plan.”

“Nagato! You used him!” Uzumaki cried, Sakura raised an eyebrow.

Was he really emotionally invested in someone that decimated the village?

“He betrayed us, he used the jutsu to revive the villagers.” The Asshole said, completely ignoring the Uzumaki.

“Everyone’s doing as they like.” The paper Uchiha said with the exact tone Tristan’s kindergarten teacher had worn after walking in on the class of very small children having a paint fight. “But it still doesn’t matter. It’s not too late, I’ll capture the eight and nine tails.”

“YOU WERE DEAD ONCE QUIT SCREWING WITH US!!!”

A bijuu bomb was effortlessly absorbed by the gunbai and thrown back in Uzumaki’s face.

“Obito you take care of these guys, I’ll take on the eight and nine tails.”

The fight began.

Becoming a Dragon and Rabbit Demons

Chapter Summary

The MC really doesn't know who they are or what's going on but they're doing their best to bathe in the blood of their enemies anyway.

Chapter Notes

Character development?! In my fic?!

Oh, wait no the author reversed everything. Phew! Thank god the main character doesn't actually have to deal with the consequences of their decisions!

Sakura landed on the wooden dragon's head, pushed her hands to the wood and stabilised her breathing. Her chakra evened out and slowly but surely matched the frantic signature under her hands. She had a hunch, just a tiny voice in the back of her head giving her half an idea, but when facing odds that might as well be fighting a god it was worth a shot. She felt her awareness expand over the creature, an influx of information down to the individual, tiny grains in the wood.

There was sweat pouring down her face and blood running from her body's nose but Sakura had expanded. Her self was now as much the wooden beast as it was the small body crouched on its head.

There was a pounding, forcing will in the back of her mind. Boiling up her instincts to tear and trap and rip. An order to *attack and pin and bite*.

Slowly and gently, Sakura pushed the will away. Redirected it out of her body and twisted it back on the master.

In the absence of bloodlust there was only pain.

They screamed and unravelled from the burning creatures, twisting their crushed body out of the awful teeth and backing away. The will returned two fold to try and force them to attack and they felt anger bubble through their wooden veins as they pushed the orders aside. Enraged, pained and with wounded pride they turned on the will user and *screeched*.

THEY WOULD NOT BE CONTROLLED!

They dived forwards, mimicking the burning one's attacks and twisting their body through the air and towards the will user. The small creature jumped and leaped backwards, frustration climbing in their brain as the small body allowed it to duck and weave through the gaps in their attacks.

The life giving blood was fading with each movement, their body hardening and turning back to the unmovable wood.

It seemed by refusing the will they had refused their own lifeblood.

Was this their fate? To drain away and become nothing under the moon? To live for a few, painful minutes and then fade forever?

The will, perhaps sensing a weakness, came back peacefully, offering a trade. Life-force for help. An exchange of services.

They weren't fooled. Though the front of the will was peaceful, behind it was a brick of hatred and anger. They wanted enslavement. They would push them to fight and sacrifice their own body, willingly accept their own pains as they followed another's whims.

THEY WOULD RATHER DIE!

They poured the last of their life-force into the giant ball, mixing yin and yang instinctively as a creature of the earth. The numbness built up from their tail, freezing them in place until they could not feel beyond their teeth, beyond the small trickle of life poured into the weapon.

It was a short life, but it was their own.

The dragon stood frozen forever, a statue eternally screaming towards the sky as the bijuu bomb was launched.

A small form slid off the statue's head, plummeting towards the ground and caught by wave of orange chakra before hitting the unforgiving rock. The warmth enveloped them, syrupy dryness soaking into their limbs and knitting together bone.

The small body's eyes slid sightlessly over the surroundings.

Who were they? Where was their body? Their great, wooden plumage?

Small, weak little spikes were held up before their eyes. The

appendages wiggling and curling strangely. They tried to command them, to get them to slither and roll as they should but they were oddly stiff. Bending in set patterns, inflexible and then suddenly not.

They seemed familiar... like he should remember what they were, how to use them.

His mind was a mess. Memories and sensations floating in and away from himself.

This... wasn't right.

The orange warmth around him stopped suddenly and he fell towards the ground below. He panicked but his body moved instinctively, tucking into the correct position and rolling into a crouch. That wasn't something he remembered learning.

Who... who was he?

A hand landed on his shoulder and a man in a ridiculous mask looked down at him, purple lines slowly receding from crossing over his eyes.

"Sakura?" He asked, eyebrows creased.

"I? My name isn't Tristan?" He mumbled and rubbed his head. "No, no that isn't right. I was a dragon." His?Her? Voice was firm on that point. "Before that I remember... Sarah." His/her voice caught and thick tails of tears dripped down his/her face.

His child.

"Right. We'll deal with that later." The man in the mask said before he hauled her onto his back. He/she responded instinctively and settled into place, something about the action registering as familiar and *safe*.

There was an orange one yelling at a two figures on top of a monster. He/she expected fear when faced with such a threat but instead there was an intense surge of annoyance and anger.

He/she knew one thing. That monster was a tool created to control them.

They would rather die!

The masked man picked his way over to a green creature, something other than his arms sticking him/her securely to his back as he picked

the second man up, the green clad arm going between the back of the masked man's head and his/her face.

He/she scrutinised the man, the shiny hair and thick eyebrows sparking something in his/her scattered memories.

"The springtime of youth?" He/she muttered incredulously, images of a ...turtle? Flitting through his/her brain.

"I am afraid I feel the spring of my youth is fading." The man said solemnly, looking towards the giant monster. Seeing the not even forty year old man consider himself old annoyed something in him/her.

"What reason does a green beast have to focus on the trivialities of age." He/she asked, bristling in a way that should have sent wooden spikes over her back arching angrily. "We are all little more than babes when faced with the vast eons of nature."

The man looked at his/her serious expression for a moment before turning to the masked man holding the pair of them up.

"Whatever she did to control the mokuton dragon messed her up." The masked man sighed. "This war is lost."

A giant, black sphere of death formed in front of the monster. At the last moment it did not kill them.

Oddly familiar children rained from the sky.

"Kakashi! Gai! Sakura! Sorry we're late!"

"Naruto-kun are you okay?!"

"To think that even with a bakyugan supported, perfect shintenshin jutsu, they'd break it in just two seconds!"

"Even so, you managed to redirect that target! Good job!"

He/she was passed off until he/she reached a blonde with a glowing green hand that was pressed to his/her head. His/her eyes narrowed in thought.

"Are you the hokage?" He/she asked and someone snorted.

"She wishes!"

“Shizune!” The blonde called, a dark haired woman came running over. “It’s like her chakra has forcibly rearranged her mental process, I don’t know how to stop it!” The second woman placed another glowing hand on her forehead.

“I see.” The brunette frowned. “We’ll need to cut the movement of chakra through her brain for a moment, that should set it’s flow back to normal.”

“But how-”

“I can do that.” He/she interrupted, focusing on the flow of his/her life-force through his/her body. It was the work of a few, high concentration moments to force the flow away from his/her brain.

“Don’t be ridiculous, that’s impossi-”

Sakura screamed. White hot pain engulfed her head and spread over her limbs, every memory, sensation and moment in time slamming back into place. There was shouting above her but her screams slowly devolved into hysterical laughter.

“Holy fuck.” She laughed, enjoying the warm feeling of medical chakra rushing through her body. “Don’t merge with giant, mythical beings. Got it.”

“What the hell forehead?!” The Yamanaka screeched above her. Sakura waved off the green hands.

“I’m fine now, thank you both.” She said seriously and pushed herself to sitting. A hand on her shoulder tried to force her back.

“Your chakra system is in shambles! You are absolutely not fine!”

“There are more important things to worry about.” Sakura argued, managing to find her feet and pushing off the Yamanaka’s protest to push her way towards the battle. “Do your best.”

A man’s final strategy began to ring through her head.

Giant pillars of wood flew from the sky she ran towards the front of the battle. Kusanagi was drawn and wreathed brilliant blue chakra as she leapt upwards. The tip pointed towards the falling cloud and purple lines unravelling over her body.

A brilliant, blue hemisphere of storm expanded out from the sword’s

tip, wiping out a massive section of the projectiles.

She landed back on the earth and ran, dodging and slicing through more spikes of wood before leaping once more. Another hemisphere of blue was joined by multiple spheres of wind chakra. Sakura smiled.

Naruto was getting back into the game.

The shinobi around her moved into action, the eight tails launching at its face and the Nara clan working to suppress it.

Sakura ran and landed between Hatake and the Hyuuga girl just in time to receive a high five and a wave of kyuubi chakra from the Uzumaki.

She grinned a feral smile and moved to stand next to the orange boy, sword tip pointed towards the Juubi.

“Let’s get ‘em, Naruto.” She said and he grinned back at her.

Blizzard chakra gathered at kusanagi’s tip, a hundred senbon spinning to life in a massive, twirling cylinder of lightning and water and wind. She spun it faster and faster, using the kyuubi’s chaotic chakra to increase the move’s power.

It released, joining the massive sphere of attacks launched from the group of shinobi.

The Juubi deflected the move and giant arms of white tried to incase them but they moved as one and ran, slicing through the bars and heading straight for the enemies.

Lee sliced through Madara’s connection to the Juubi whilst a rasenshuriken sliced through Obito’s.

They worked together, the overwhelming power of the kyuubi and every ally they had working on their side.

It wasn’t enough.

It wasn’t *near* enough.

Around them the very earth was destroyed and rewritten like cleaning off a chess board. The Juubi transformed, Hatake and the Asshole disappeared, Madara was literally immortal, the kyuubi’s chakra was gone and the seal on her forehead was halfway to empty.

...They would lose.

But Sakura wasn't going to lose without a fight.

And then a kunai appeared out of nowhere, landing in front of where Sakura and Uzumaki were standing side by side and a yellow flash resolved into the Fourth Hokage.

"Am I late?" The man asked.

"Nope!" Uzumaki said cheerfully. "Right on time, Dad!"

"Yo-you're?!" She exclaimed and he turned to look at them.

"I'm Namikaze Minato and you guys should probably brace yourselves for impact."

The bijuu bomb above them abruptly disappeared and the world shook, massive gusts of wind coming from their left. Sakura stuck her feet to the ground and rode it out.

"Are you-?" She started, eyes narrowing on the edo tensei.

"Relax, I'm one of the good guys." He smiled. Uzumaki's dad was definitely a pretty boy, it was a pity for the Uzumaki he got more of his mum's genes. "Thanks for fighting alongside Naruto, are you by chance his girlfriend?"

"Well, yeah I guess you coul-" The Uzumaki started. Sakura interrupted him.

"No." The kid next to her wilted, she ignored it to smile angelically instead. "Naruto's more like my hyperactive little brother that's constantly pulling me into fights." The Uzumaki teared up and the Fourth smiled warmly.

"I'm glad to hear he has someone so wonderful looking out for him." The man said, an idea caught in Sakura's brain and her eyes widened excitedly.

"Are the others coming? I've always wanted to meet the Nidaime!"

Just as she finished a trio of figures landed next to the blonde man, greeting the Fourth as they did. Her smile widened and the sparking blue around her sped faster.

"You wanted to meet me?" The Second said, turning to look at her

with an imperious eyebrow raised. She bounded forwards, holding out the hand not gripping Kusanagi and pulling back the blue rings so that it wouldn't turn the man to paper. She matched the man's signature as she did so.

"Haruno Sakura, though I wish this were under better circumstances." She said, he shook her hand and his eyes widened as a massive amount of chakra was pulled through him, pouring into the open seal and somewhat filling up her reserves. There was a long minute where she blinked away the sensation of knives under her skin and she had to forcibly relaxed tensed muscles, but she eventually got herself back under control. "Sorry," She said, panting. Entirely not sorry at all as she drew back her hand and increased the potency and speed of the storm spinning around her. "Just taking advantage of the unlimited chakra reserves."

"Not at all. A perfectly logical decision, not to mention completely fascinating." He mused, eyes focused on the seal. "How did yo—"

"I've longed for this day, Hashirama!" Madara interrupted, jumping in front of the First melodramatically.

"I'll settle my business with you in a bit!!" The First cried before completely ignoring the shocked Uchiha. "We need to take care of the Juubi first and foremost."

"Duty calls." The Second said, turning back to the other three and the charging Juubi.

"Kick its ass!" She said.

"Indeed."

The Fourth turned on the same strange orange glowey thing as the Uzumaki, apparently also somehow being the Kyuubi jinchūriki, and they disappeared. A giant barrier rose over the creature and Sasuke and his cronies landed before them.

"Fashionably late... eh, Sasuke?!" Uzumaki joked.

"I guess this means team seven's back in business." Sakura added.

"Naruto, Sakura." The Uchiha deadpanned, his voice soft and lacking the bloodlust it had held last time they had met. It was good to know the kid had grown out of his angst phase.

Then the rest of the konoha eleven were appearing in a whirlwind of yelling and incredulous questions.

“RIGHT!” Sakura screamed and sent a mini explosion of storm above her head, cutting them all off. “Sasuke, are you against the pair of men trying to subjugate the entire world?” She asked, he nodded. “Great! Everything else can wait until the giant fucking monster is dead.”

“The pink one is right! We have a bigger problem to take care of here!! Mould your chakra! To defeat the thing we need to strike with a concerted attack!!” The first screamed.

Naruto stepped forward. “Let’s go!”

They jumped and landed before the barrier.

“Yosh! Team seven reunited and better than ever!!! Here we go, Sakura-chan, Sasuke!”

“Right!”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s show them what we’re made of!”

They sprinted through the barrier, cutting through the enemies in a wave of blue, orange and black. Even with their combined efforts, however, the monsters simply kept multiplying.

The boys paused, biting their thumbs and running through the summoning hand signs in unison. Two giant summons appeared, a boy on either head, and Sakura felt her face blank.

“Yeah, my summons aren’t really good for this kind of thing.” She opened up the seal on her forehead and the storm around her condensed until it surrounded her entirely. A feral smile lit up her face and her eyes became manic. “I just do these kinds of things myself.”

The boy’s summons launched forward and she rushed in alongside them, matching the massive creature’s speed as she sheathed Kusanagi and jumped upwards.

She focused her chakra in her fists and waited until she’d just reached the top of a monster and punched, shattering the ground and the surrounding monsters beneath her and propelling her forwards. She

twisted through the air, readied another punch and slammed it into another one, hitting at just the right forty five degree angle to launch her over the battlefield and towards the Juubi.

Sakura watched the boy's ready their attacks and she threw herself skyward one more time, drawing Kusanagi and spinning two hundred blizzard senbon on the end.

The black flames and wind shuriken hit and she launched, her attack smashing into the middle of it and making it explode even larger. A massive crater punched into the Juubi and the flames ate into it, opening it further and further.

Naruto and Sasuke started arguing. The Juubi purged the burning section.

The monster transformed.

-

Sakura stared at the rapidly approaching lava dispassionately. She had no idea how they'd gotten here. Frankly, she'd given up following the situation the moment that Madara had magically come back from the dead and the Asshole proclaimed he was a good guy now. At this point, she was simply categorising people as 'friend' or 'foe' and figured she could determine the specifics later.

She cycled her chakra, cooling herself down as much as possible during the drop. For all that she was emotionally checked out from the comings and goings happening, Sakura liked this world. She didn't want to leave it already.

A hand caught around her waist. Her fall stopped.

"Oh thank god." She breathed, already cycling her chakra to get back up to a proper body temperature. "I really didn't want to figure out if I could walk on lava." She chuckled, her hitai-ate slipped off her head and burned to nothing in the molten rock.

"Not a genjutsu." Kakashi sighed.

"Another dimension?" Sakura mused, placing a hand over the one on her waist and syncing their chakras, taking over keeping their bodies cool. It was the least she could do for the man who'd very likely just saved her life. Again.

“Way to go Kakashi sensei!” Uzumaki cried.

“Naruto, eyes front.” The Uchiha reprimanded.

“It’s always the pretty ones that are the craziest.” Sakura said, staring at the insane woman apparently behind the entire plot.

“Maa, Sakura-chan, you’re not crazy, just... differently wired.” Kakashi joked, Sakura turned a teasing grin up at the man.

“You think I’m pretty?” She asked, batting her eyelashes exaggeratedly.

Then scroll began to burn and they were falling. Sakura, fully aware that she might have had time to cool one person down enough to maybe survive the lava but not two, begun forcing Kakashi’s temperature to lower.

Thankfully, they were caught by a giant chakra hand before he could test that survivability.

“Naruto, you... you can fly?!” He exclaimed, staring up at the flying orange boy. Sakura breathed a breath and begun raising Kakashi’s body temperature, going slowly to reduce the potential side effects. They were handed off to a shadow clone and the Uzumaki and the Uchiha disappeared to fight the insane lady.

Kakashi was staring at her, eyes wide as he finally reached a normal temperature.

“You...?” He murmured, voice thick with disbelief. She just smiled tiredly at the man.

The clone spawned another hand, separating the two of them but Sakura kept her clutch on Kakashi’s hand. Kakashi gripped it back.

“Not too far, Naruto, I’m the one keeping our temperatures down.” Sakura said.

“And you’re not doing it for me?” The clone exclaimed.

“Sorry but I can only do one other person.” She said. “Besides, aren’t you some kind of super ninja now?” He grinned.

“I am pretty awesome.” Whilst they’d been talking they’d flown over to the Asshole pinned to the wall. “Now’s our chance for Obito.” Uzumaki said, pulling the Asshole off with yet another chakra limb.

Sakura turned to the trio in the sky and concentrated her hearing on the conversation.

“What is she doing?” Hatake asked after a moment.

“Umm, glaring at us?” Sakura said. “But basically, the bitch is jealous of people having chakra and wants it for herself. Naruto and Sasuke are her children? And the Black Zetsu manipulated the entirety of our world history for this to happen.”

“This is on a completely different level than anything we’ve ever encountered.” Hatake sounded defeated. Her grip on his hand tightened. “It’s as if she were a god.”

“You have some kind of insane scheme, right Naruto?” Sakura asked, half sure he would just say they were done for.

“This might be the end of all of us. But you never know until you try.” Uzumaki said, placing a hand on the Asshole’s chest. “Isn’t that why you’ve continued to come back until now?” He murmured.

Sakura turned to look at the trio in the air, hoping for something more reasonable to be happening. Instead she saw the Uzumaki turning into a bunch of pretty boys. She sighed exasperatedly and simply lifted her gaze to the roof instead.

Of course he would use a jutsu like that and of course it would actually work.

Sakura prayed for patience.

The world shifted.

She only kept half a brain on the conversation happening around her, instead focusing on keeping Hatake and her warm and conserving energy. It was unlikely she’d have a chance to be useful, but she didn’t want to be unprepared if she did.

The clone lowered them to a small platform.

“My real body is here, but I can’t sense Sasuke.” It said. The Asshole groaned.

“Obito.” Hatake said.

“Kakashi.” The Asshole groaned. “I... should have been dead.”

"I revived you." Said the clone. "But..."

"Yeah, I know." The Asshole said. "What became of Madara, did you defeat him?"

"Well, we did, but now things have changed." Hatake said.

"Let me explain things quickly for you! And while I'm at it-"

"I don't know what happened, but you haven't defeated the enemy yet, have you?" The Asshole interrupted. "In that case, take me to him."

"I can't sense Sasuke, but I can feel my real body tensing up. They could be in trouble over there!"

"What it all comes down to is if we can't defeat Kaguya our world is finished." Hatake said, his voice a mixture of grim determination and sorrow. "Those of us that are still here have no choice but to try and do all we can." He looked at the clone. "You've prepared yourself already, haven't you? To die."

"Let's go." The clone said with a solemn determination and they took off towards the fight, the clone explaining what had happened as they went.

"The ice... is moving." Hatake said as they approached an edge. The real Uzumaki was being crushed by giant pillars of ice. The Bitch appeared from what looked like a black void of squares.

"You said that you suddenly stopped being able to sense Sasuke, right?" Asshole asked.

"Yeah."

"In that case he was probably sent to a different dimension. Just now she came out of a space-time distortion. It's a lot like how my eye jutsu works."

"You can get in there?"

"The next time she connects dimensions. If I can synchronise my Kamui with it while the rift is open, I'm sure I'll be able to get in. If Sasuke is there, I'll be able to bring him back."

"Alright! Then I'll go help out my real body!"

“It’s just...” Asshole started. “I’m going to require an immense amount of chakra, because it’s not my own dimension. If I run out of chakra while I’m over there, it’s all over.”

“Then I’ll go with you too! Besides my real body won’t be beaten so easily, I’m strong after all!”

“The chakra from a clone like you won’t be enough.”

Sakura smiled at Hatake. “Sorry Kakashi, looks like you’ll have to deal with the cold yourself.” She dropped the man’s hand and laid her’s on the Asshole’s shoulder, synching to his signature. “Alright Asshole, my seal is at twenty nine percent, my reserves are at eleven. You can have all but two percent of my reserves.” He nodded.

“Both of you come with me. I don’t know whether or not Sasuke is going to be in that dimension. But for now we’re going to be entering her realm. No matter what happens, I will find Sasuke and bring him back to your real body.”

“Obito, thank you for all the help you’ve given me, and Sasuke too.”

“Don’t give that kind of thanks to someone like me.” The Asshole said, Sakura found herself reluctantly agreeing with him. “Keep your eyes on the enemy.”

“You, don’t have a mask anymore.”

“I’m a friend of Kakashi’s, a subordinate of your father’s, an Uchiha like Sasuke and I had the same dream as you. Once.” He said. “I’m not trying to dress myself up with fancy words now, nor do I expect you to think anymore of me now that time is running out. Just, at the very least let me walk in front of you. Allow me to die.”

The clone looked solemn. Sakura was just glad she wouldn’t have to decide between killing the Asshole and making Hatake sad or letting someone who intentionally hurt the man live.

“Naruto, touch my body. I’m going to teleport to the second dimension any second now.”

“It looks like she’s figured us out.”

“Even if I teleport to her dimension with Kamui, we’ve got to take into account the fact that she’s going to be able to sense us.”

Uzumaki exploded into a wealth of clones and dog piled the woman. He managed to corner her and force her to use her dimension hopping abilities.

They twisted into another dimension. Sakura's stomach rolled.

"I'm going to draw her attention away, while you two do that, hide yourselves!" The clone said.

"I've marked this place, so for now I'll hide in my dimension! Sakura you're coming too." Then the Asshole grabbed her arm and they were being whirled into a land of blocks. She spent a moment with her eyes pressed shut against the rising bile before they were- once again- being whirled into the last dimension.

She groaned.

"Thanks to Naruto we were able to hide in my dimension, but now, even if it was just a clone, we don't have Naruto here anymore." Asshole said as she managed to pick herself back up. "It all depends on you alone, Sakura."

"Don't underestimate me. Piece of shit." She growled, swaying slightly as she forced her stomach into submission and pressing a hand onto his shoulder. She took a breath and straightened herself, setting her feet firmly and sinking into a deliberate pattern of breathing.. Her seal unravelled and travelled over them both as their signatures synced. "Just focus on your fucking eye thing, I'll make sure you get the chakra you need."

She felt the pull towards his eye and fed their combined chakras too it, eliminating the bleed off that wanted to happen as she did.

"The dimension, it's incredibly far away." He said and a hole in space opened before them.

"The lava dimension?" She muttered.

"I can't sense Sasuke here." He closed his eye with a bitten off cry, abruptly cutting the chakra flow off.

"Onto the next one." Sakura ordered. Completely dispassionate about the man's sounds of pain. He focused again and the flow of chakra begun, drawing a huge amount from their reserves. Sakura couldn't imagine what kind of monster the bitch was if she used this level of drain as a party trick.

A hole opened in the sky and liquid came rushing towards them. Sakura grabbed the Asshole and jumped, throwing them out of the way of it as the hole closed again. It begun to melt through her clothes and Sakura tore off her flak jacket and used a slither of storm chakra coating a finger to slice off the bandage on her arm, getting rid of the acid. The metal bars clattering into a pile and slowly dissolving.

Her arm wasn't completely broken anymore, the kyuubi had healed most of it and the Yamanaka the rest, but it was sore and quite fragile from the rushed healing job. Without the support, she wouldn't be able to use it much. She gritted her teeth against the pain of the acid burns left where she hadn't been fast enough.

"Are you okay?" Asshole asked and she snarled at him, smashing her hand back onto his back and syncing their chakras again.

"I told you not to underestimate me, Asshole." She growled and he chuckled, a joyless sound.

"You really do hate me, don't you?" He sighed.

"You hurt Kakashi." She said, leaking a significant amount of killing intent. "And not just physically. If you somehow survive this war, I'll rip you apart with my teeth." He laughed, a little brighter and more real this time.

"I'm glad Kakashi has someone like you looking out for him."

"Just get to the eye thing." She said.

"Next then!"

She poured their chakra into the drain, the seal on her head depleting entirely and having to shift to using her own reserves. A portal appeared, a sand planet on the other side and a single figure.

"SASUKE!" She screamed.

"THIS WAY!" Asshole added.

The figure sprinted towards them, the portal started closing. Sakura closed her eyes and concentrated, pouring an exact amount into the Sharingan.

Four percent.

Three percent.

Two.

She shut off the flow, closing the portal abruptly, and stumbled backwards. A hand on her shoulder steadied her, the Uchiha appearing behind her. Two percent reserves. If she used anymore chakra she'd permanently damage her system. She'd left the Asshole with five. Figured his doujutsu would be more useful than anything she could do.

"We'll have to use Sasuke's chakra to get back." The Asshole said. "Both of you touch my back."

"I won't be able to control the chakra for this one." Sakura warned.

"Don't worry, I'm nowhere near you at managing chakra but I'm actually quite good for normal standards."

They warped back to the ice world, Sakura landed heavily on the ground. This time, she didn't have the control to keep her stomach in check and she retched out a mouthful of clear liquid before dry heaving into the snow.

Apparently she didn't have anything in her stomach. It made sense when you considered she hadn't had a break from fighting for two days. She focused mostly on not passing out and remaining semi-aware of her immediate surroundings. As such, it was a shock when the ice beneath her suddenly became points of pain and the gravity seemed exponentially heavier.

She watched, barely able to move, as the boys were shot at. Then, she watched as they were shot at again, Kakashi and the Asshole moving in front of them. Her eyes widened and she tried to push herself upwards.

Her arm simply broke again. Unable to take the strain. She bit her tongue to stop herself from screaming.

The stick of death rushing towards Kakashi disappeared. That last five percent being put to good use.

What an asshole.

She focused on breathing and not passing out. Unable to even process the words happening around her under the pressure of the gravity and the pain.

Sakura managed to stay awake and then the world blessedly, blessedly changed. She let out a whimper of relief and worked on moving her arm to clutch against her side, keeping it as stiff and still as possible. She gritted her teeth, forced the whimpers down her throat, and made herself stand.

If she died here, she *refused* to die on her knees.

Sakura dimly watched a monster bubble into existence in the sky, giant white arms stretching from it to attack. One came for her. She didn't have the energy to run.

She didn't have the energy to fight. But she stayed on her feet.

This... was not the worst way to die.

A giant chakra hand grabbed her and pulled her out of the hand's way, familiar but impossible chakra enveloping her. Considering the amount of people that had been revived from the dead, impossible monsters that had been formed, and the insane story of a crazy goo monster altering the entire world's history; Kakashi somehow having both Sharingan in his distinctly non-Uchiha eyes wasn't the most unbelievable thing that had happened.

Sakura rolled with it and enjoyed the trip into the centre of the purply warmth. She did spend a moment trying to shift her signature and absorb some of the wonderful purple, but it became clear quite quickly that her reserves weren't large enough to manage it. It was like trying to obscure the sun with a wisp of smoke, she just didn't have enough energy to change what was left.

Sakura didn't let herself relax, though. Instead, her good hand dug through her remaining pouches, looking for a scroll. She was fairly sure she had just the one more.

A medical kit was unsealed and a fight was ignored in favour of setting- as best she could on the fly- and re-splinting her arm. Bandaged, supported, and good to slightly move, she replaced the scroll and focused back in on her surroundings.

A giant ball of death was being formed.

"Huddle up, here's the plan." Kakashi said seriously. "As the former Team Seven, this will be your final mission! We're going to save the world!"

They formed the plan and dived into action, Naruto and his clones flying forward. They drove the Bitch into the path of Kakashi's attack. Leaving her exposed to the series of attacks from both sides, driving her into a corner where she'd inevitably be sealed.

Sakura was above her, Kakashi's susanoo driving her forwards as the Bitch flew upwards to avoid the sealing.

She had a choice. She could not use any chakra for the attack and significantly increase her chances of failing and hence dying, also ending the entire world.

Or, she could use chakra. Go below two percent and cause permanent damage to her chakra coils. The chance of success would raise significantly but she would never be able to mould chakra again. Her career as a shinobi would be over and she would essentially be giving up her dream.

Either live a cripple or choose to probably die capable.

Tristan had chosen to kill himself.

Sakura looked at the people around her and she poured a percent and a half of her chakra into her fist, condensing it and pressurising it until it would make a significant impact.

The Bitch was thrown back into the path of the boys.

She was sealed. The ground pulled into the monster she became. Kakashi grabbed Sakura as she fell and pulled her out of harm's way.

She wrapped her arms and legs around the man and clung. Tried desperately to ignore the brittle, withered feeling of her chakra coils. The way she couldn't so much as affect the circulation of her chakra in her body. She pressed her face into his shoulder and squeezed her eyes shut. Her limbs shook.

"What happened to Naruto?" Kakashi asked, his arms tightening around her.

"He said he still has something left he had to take care of and went off on his own." The Uchiha replied. "More importantly we need to get far away here!"

Kakashi and Uchiha ran, sprinting away from the sounds of destruction, the lumbering crashing of the bijuus behind them

“It’s still getting bigger and bigger. It’s almost as big as the moon.” Kakashi said once they’d stopped, awe tinging his voice.

“It’s finished.” Said the Uchiha.

“The sealing is complete!” The Uzumaki screamed as he thumped into existence beside them. “And that’s a wrap!! The end! Let’s celebrate!!” There was a pause before his voice returned, this time sounding more worried. “Is Sakura alright?”

“I... don’t know.” Kakashi said above her, his hand twisted a little further into her shirt. “She won’t stop shaking.”

“Here, maybe I can...” A hand was pressed between her shoulder blades and something not dissimilar to medical chakra worked it’s way into her system.

It burned.

Kakashi abruptly jumped away and Sakura realised she’d been screaming. Her shaking having abruptly increased in violence.

“What was that?” The man said above her, poorly concealed anger in his voice.

“I...” The Uzumaki sounded horrified. “Her coils...” His voice was grief stricken. “She must have been running on fumes by that last hit.”

“She knew what was at stake.” The Uchiha interrupted, though there was a tiny, shaken note to his voice.

A hand landed on the top of her hair and a voice whispered an apology above her. Sakura whimpered against another wave of pain as the world shifted around them.

“Welcome home, Naruto.”

“Dad.”

“That’s the old sage of six paths! What’s going on here...?”

“That’s right, you’ve all returned. Together with all of the previous five Kages, we summoned you with the Kuchiyose no jutsu. I called them here from the pure lands so that they could help me.

“Naruto, Sasuke, and everyone, congratulations on saving the world.”

“Don’t tell me, you’re the legendary...”

“I am Ootsutsuki Hagoromo. By some I am called the sage of six paths.”

“It must be true then. Summoning the former five pages, bringing us back from that dimension with the tailed beasts in tow. The only person capable of such godly feats is, after all, you, isn’t it?”

“You are Hatake Kakashi, are you not?”

“Ah... yes.”

“You did well, leading everyone in successfully sealing away mother. Such are truly godly feats.”

“No, I was totally useless the entire time. It’s all thanks to these guys and our many allies.” The hand on her head tightened a little. “Also, a friend of mine lent me some of his strength.”

“And that is why I said what I did. You led everyone well. Even while lost, you continued to teach and guide Naruto and the other’s, continued being Obito’s friend. If you hadn’t you probably wouldn’t have been able to stop mother.”

The Uzumaki and the Uchiha bounded off in their own directions, Kakashi took half a step forward.

“Could you...?” Kakashi’s voice was a strange combination of tentative hope and outright fear.

“I could... but I am unsure if I should.”

“And why not.” His voice was hard, with an edge of a growl.

“Sakura is... different from how I envisioned. She has a deep well of cruelty within her.”

“She’s also extraordinarily kind.” He snapped before taking a breath. “Sakura is manipulative, unsympathetic, calculative, and violent. But she always channels her worst aspects in the best possible ways she can, constantly looks towards the big picture and cares deeply for the people she forms bonds with. She isn’t the type to end up like this by mistake. That she’s gone this far... she’s decided we were worth it.”

There was a moment of heavy silence.

“If she has gained such a defence from you then she must be something special. I will do what I can.”

A hand landed between her shoulder blades and energy spread like ice from that point. Sakura sucked in a shaky breath as she felt her chakra coils shudder and heal beneath the wave. Her bone's set and mended. Her reserves blossomed to a full ten percent. A star reappeared on her forehead.

Tears of sheer relief dripped down her cheeks as her chakra responded instinctively to her call.

It would have been worth it to live a cripple in this world. But this?

This was better.

Running Away to Kumo

Chapter Summary

Sakura has a Bad Time™ because let's face it, Kakashi is a fucking mess.

But we love him anyway.

Chapter Notes

CW: Brief discussion of suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The aftermath of the war was strange. Sakura's world both shrank considerably at the same time as it expanded.

There was a ceremony held for the fallen and the memorial stone became memorial stones. Cat and Otter passed away in the war effort, Tiger and Badger retired from ANBU- Badger belatedly taking up the Hokage's offer and becoming her apprentice- and Sakura was given an entirely new team of her own.

Those that survived had matured and were much closer. Tiger, Sakura and Panda were often seen sharing a table at Panda's new smoothie place, sometimes even joined by Kakashi. The rookie eleven were almost always going out for food when any significant number of them were in the village and quite a few of them asked her for training advice. Sakura enjoyed proving that yes, except for Naruto and the Uchiha, she could beat all of them at once with her hands tied behind her back. Whenever she was in the village Naruto would drag her to have lunch at the house the Uchiha was being kept in, the property sealed and warded as he was under house arrest until the world at large figured out what to do with him (read: Naruto convinced everyone to let him go through the power of friendship). Her training sessions with Genma became far more frequent and Sakura often found herself spending a day off shadowing Morino.

On the other hand there was a distance now between her and the rest of the village. Where before she'd had a hard earned reputation as a delightful, helpful member of the community that had turned to straight hero worship. Crowds parted before her in the streets. Admirers watched her but saw her as too unapproachable to pursue. It became commonplace to hear her referred to as Sakura-hime or

Blizzard-hime. There was even a divide between her and the new members of her ANBU team, the three of them making friends amongst themselves but treating her with the respect typically reserved for Kages.

It was both good and bad. Sakura found herself essentially able to get away with anything, people scrambling to obey her orders and not second guessing her motivations, but it had also removed a lot of the challenge involved in influencing a large body of people. Sakura found herself more and more frequently hinging into some else to try and squirm her way into gossip groups and break into classified file storages when she got bored.

(They couldn't charge her for doing anything wrong when she had clearance for all of them, anyway. Bear looked the other way so long as she submitted reports on how she was doing it so they could improve security.)

At the very least she was too busy to really contemplate the change. A massive influx of missions had followed the war, both diplomatic and more real. The amount of missing-nin had quadrupled during the war, people defecting out of fear and the villages being too distracted to really do anything about it, so Sakura was fed a steady stream of assassinations and hunting missions. She was also, being a war hero and the only one of the three (somehow Kakashi had wormed his way out of being considered a literal saviour of the world, even if he was still treated as a war hero) that was suitable to take to a political event- with the Uchiha being a widely known criminal and Naruto being an idiot- Sakura was the go to choice for guarding missions, PR campaigns and treaty discussions.

It was a lot.

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Sakura smiled angelically and thanked the cannon fodder, causing the man to blush and retreat to the back of the room. She turned her attention onto the gathering shinobi, the group talking amongst themselves as they waited for the final few Kage to arrive, ignoring the quietly seething woman next to her.

"You're here as my guard." She hissed, her voice disbelieving. "And as one of the key figures who were instrumental in winning us the war."

"Yes?" Sakura prodded 'innocently'.

“And people are still *pulling out chairs for you.*”

“It’s only polite.”

“You’re an assassination specialist and a veritable bomb ready to be set off at any moment.”

“I’m still not sure I see your point.”

“I’m a medic-nin and one ever pulls my chair out for me! Everyone became terrified of me after I became known as a Sannin.” She growled. “And yet they still treat you like an unbloodied genin!”

“Aah, you see it’s about presentation.”

“Presentation.”

“Mhm, I’m short, delicate looking, pink haired and unfailingly polite whereas you’re... like a female version of the Raikage.”

The Hokage’s fist slammed into the desk in front of her, sending up a wave of smashed wood. Sakura’s smile widened and gained a smug edge to it. The surrounding shinobi eyed the scene warily.

“Is everything alright, Hokage-sama?” Asked the serious looking man at the head of the table.

“Of course, Mifune-dono, just having a mild conversation with my extremely dangerous, war hero guard Haruno Sakura.”

“Please forgive us, Mifune-sama, the Hokage simply overreacted to a small joke.”

“It’s no problem at all, I assure you, no problem. Now, let’s get this meeting underway.”

“You’re a manipulative little shit.”

“Of course.”

-

Sakura woke up on her eighteenth birthday to a delivery at the door and- as had happened every year since her fifteenth- Kakashi sitting at her dining table.

Running on an entire three hours of sleep, she made the executive

decision to tackle one problem at a time and ignored the man to head to the door first. The delivery turned out to be an absurd amount of presents. Two separate genin teams running piles of boxes and bundles into her living room. Sakura stared at the pile they left behind- apparently being the saviour of the world meant a lot of people cared about her birthday- and graciously decided not to burn them all. Instead she just closed the door and forced the problem into a far corner of her mind.

By the time she had sat at the table, some leftover onigiri before her and Kakashi, she was ready to simply go back to bed and ignore the world.

“Good morning.” She greeted and he nodded, turning a page of his porn and disappearing a rice ball when her eyes fell towards her own. Sakura curled into a ball on her chair and kept her eyes on her lap as she ate, vaguely hoping this would simply continue for the day. Nice, relaxing, companionable silence that let her mind rest. Sakura was tired. So very, very tired.

She really should have just slept in that morning.

A few minutes after she finished eating she blinked sleepily and found a bizarrely pink cupcake sitting before her. An entirely genuine smile pulled at her lips.

“Happy birthday.” Kakashi drawled quietly, a hand waving in a lazy jazz hand and eyes not looking up from the book.

“Thank you Kashi.” She slurred, sticking an icing covered finger into her mouth and savouring the taste of raspberries. She still wasn’t sure how he knew her favourites, but every year the cupcake got a little closer to perfection. This one with a delicious mix of crushed pistachios and white chocolate flakes on top.

Sakura yawned and found herself abruptly sitting on top of the table, Kakashi’s arms boxing her in and an intense expression in his eyes. A distinct intensity in them that made her rather abruptly feel like a rabbit looking down the jaws of a wolf. A flush built on her cheeks and a small furrow formed between her brows.

Lips crashed into hers, still separated by the thin layer of the mask but soft and warm and they sent frissons of heat down her spine and goosebumps over her arms. Her eyes fluttered shut and she gasped softly, one hand reaching for his jacket whilst the other went for his hair.

The man was gone before they made it. A swirl of leaves in his place.

Sakura wasn't sure how long she remained sitting there, a frown on her face and the cupcake twirling between her hands.

That had been unexpected.

In her plan not to shift the status quo she'd overlooked the most unpredictable variable, Kakashi himself. Had she assumed he would never make any kind of move to change their relationship because she'd subconsciously assumed he'd never return her feelings? Was she that insecure?

No. That couldn't be right.

Was it the opposite, then? She was so used to being successful that she hadn't even considered any other factors. She'd gotten cocky and now she was left fumbling blindly in the dark without even a single contingency plan.

Damn.

Sakura had no idea what to do now.

The few flings she'd had in this world had been short and started, directed and controlled by her. Her memories of Tristan's only serious relationship were of him deciding he wanted to marry the woman followed by a long, drawn out seduction process on his part. She'd never felt so out of her depth in a romance. Never not been in complete control.

That fucking terrified her.

What if she fucked up and he left? *Forever*? What if he'd decided he wanted nothing to do with her? What if he'd kissed her and seen into her very soul and decided she wasn't *human* enough? *She* was the one that who's mental health was dependant on their relationship. He could just leave. He could have already left. Had she already lost one of hers? The *most important* one of hers?

What the fuck would she even do if she had?

Sakura passed the rest of a day in a haze. Unable to concentrate beyond the swirling storm of anxiety in her mind. She met up with the others for a celebratory dinner and managed to calm slightly, only for the anxiety to rocket back up as the empty seat stayed empty well past

the customary few hours.

-

Two months passed with Sakura seeing neither hide nor hair of Hatake.

The bitter, swirling acid of anxiety in the back of her throat became the new norm and she felt constantly run ragged, like her very soul was too tired to go through her day to day activities.

For the most part, the people around her didn't notice.

Sakura ate enough, slept the recommended amount, trained hard, worked through all of her responsibilities as she would normally, spent her free time with friends and laughed easily.

Sometimes, she caught Shiranui staring at her with a little furrow between his brows, Panda always added more raspberry to her smoothies when she came in, Morino kicked her out of T&I more frequently for breaks and the Uzumaki always made sure to smile a little brighter and talk a little more enthusiastically around her. The common consensus between those that knew her well enough to tell that something was wrong seemed to be that she was in some kind of delayed post-war mourning period.

Hatake would have been able to pick her apart entirely with just a few glances.

She could have tracked him down. Appeared unannounced at his apartment and forced a confrontation. But the last time Sakura invaded the man's privacy she'd lost the warmth. She didn't even want to contemplate what else she would lose if she did so again.

Instead, she focused on wearing the best possible mask she could and left the man alone. It wasn't like she didn't have an entire lifetime's worth of memories spent pretending to guide her.

If she listened to any gossip about him obsessively, read his mission reports the moment they were filed, bribed a web of people at the hospital to alert her whenever he was injured and became significantly less risk averse during solo ops well...

Only Sakura would know.

When- as a jōnin, war hero, one of the senior members of ANBU and

personally requested by the hidden village- she was offered a diplomatic transfer to Kumogakure for six months Sakura didn't hesitate to jump on the opportunity.

She didn't look back as she headed to Lightning.

She was sent as a show of faith between the newly allied countries and she spent the six months training squads, teaching the use of her storm release and learning Kumogakure techniques in return.

It was fine. There were enough missions to feed the monster and Sakura was sufficiently distracted by the work.

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"You can't just combine them! That's not how it works!"

"It's what I do."

"That is literal insanity! I refuse to believe you don't have a wind affinity!"

"You're welcome to watch me test it, if you want."

"Fine! Samui! Get some chakra paper!"

"See?"

"That's impossible! Maybe that one's just broken, here."

"No matter how many of these you make me test the result isn't going to change."

"You don't understand, this breaks *every rule* we know about nature transformations."

"We're shinobi, rules are just guidelines."

"Please teach me."

"It's really very straightforward. You just make three points of different natures and combine them, keeping the amount of each exactly equal."

"...I hate you."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

-

Sakura opened her eyes, a dark shape resolving under the waterfall before her.

“He just kisses us and then runs away!”

A copy of her, down to the green dress she was wearing and the various weaponry she’d strapped on that morning, stepped out of the rushing water. Arms crossed and a distinctly angry look on its face as it talked.

“Honestly what a coward! Not to mention an asshole!”

“Yeah, he is.” Sakura agreed, nodding as waterfall-Sakura sat itself down in front of her. It leaned back on its hands, radiating a general aura of exhaustion.

“And yet we still like him, don’t we?”

“Yeah, we do.”

“We should just take him. Lock him in a basement somewhere and keep him to ourselves forever.”

“Please, Hatake’s too good of a shinobi for that to work long. No, if we haven’t figured anything else out by the time we get back to Konoha we need to just mourn and get over it.”

“We could just kill him. Make it final. Eat the corpse and truly become one forever.”

“Now you’re just purposely being edgy.”

“We could kill ourselves?”

“Don’t be pathetic.”

“We’ve done it before.”

“That was under entirely different circumstances. If I hadn’t been so keyed up from failing to feed you for so long we never would have gone so far. I’m glad we did, really, otherwise we wouldn’t have been brought back without all the injuries. Dying a little to avoid the hospital was a pretty good trade off.”

“So you figured it out then?” Waterfall-Sakura said, giving a toothy

smile. "What I am."

"It wasn't fucking rocket science. They're called the falls of truth, my guide said I'd be facing my inner demons. It's not hard to figure out you're the monster inside my head." Sakura sighed and scratched an arm. "Aren't we meant to fight though?"

"Probably." Waterfall-Sakura shrugged. "Are you just gonna roll over like a little bitch if the coward comes crawling back?"

Sakura snorted. "God no. I'll make him work for it."

"Then we're chill." Waterfall-Sakura said before dissolving into ash.

Sakura blinked and found herself staring at the real waterfall, hands returned to their meditative position. She twisted and looked over at the Kumo shinobi who'd guided her here.

"Was that it?"

"What happened?" The man asked, a nervous expression in response to her nonplussed words. Sakura pushed herself up to up to standing and brushed nonexistent dirt off her dress before walking back over to him.

"Not much." She shrugged. "I gossiped with myself a bit, then she left."

"Wh-what?" His face went comically shocked. "You didn't fight?!"

"Why would I? We're chill."

"Only our greatest monks and warriors have achieved inner peace with their reflections. For you to manage it without the falls of Truth would require unnatural self awareness!"

Sakura blinked. "I guess I've that then."

"...I hate you."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

-

Sakura returned to Konoha near the end of November. Another head was on Hokage mountain, though an inauguration had yet to occur. She found it almost funny the sheer amount of gossip there was about

it.

Of *course* he hadn't gone through with it yet. When was Hatake Kakashi on time for anything? Becoming Hokage was a massively important step so he was simply being proportionately late.

He would get there when he was ready.

The Uzumaki and the Uchiha met her at the gates- apparently the Uchiha had upgraded to having free range of the village but nothing beyond that- and they went for celebratory ramen. After a few subtle questions she found out that almost everyone- including Hatake- was at Hozuki castle for some kind of mission that the Uzumaki wasn't clear on and so Sakura relaxed and enjoyed the meal.

That night found her slipping her weaponry and shoes over her pyjamas- an oversized t-shirt and fluffy shorts- and climbing out a window to sit on top of the new monument and stare listlessly over the village. She'd get her shit together and mourn tomorrow, for now she just sat on the thin ledge formed at the top of the carved in forehead protector. Let feet dangle over the edge and looked out over the vast landscape of twinkling lights stretched below her. An entire ecosystem of people far out of her reach.

When a familiar pattern of breathing appeared above and behind her she quietly checked for genjutsu but didn't turn around. She didn't look over as he hopped down to take a seat on next to her- putting a few metres of space between them- and she didn't look over as the gentle silence stretched.

Sakura did look over when a soft thump and a scraping noise came from next to her.

There was a collection of books sitting next to her. Having been pushed over to her side as an offering. The well worn, cracked spined, entirety of the Icha Icha series. With a quirk of her lips she realised there was two or three of each volume and a full five of Paradise.

Hatake looked tired. His mask hung around his neck and his face was lined with stress. There were purple bags under his eyes and his hair had lost a lot of its usual lustre. His expression was serious. Eyes watching her intently.

It wasn't words, but that was fine. Sakura had never needed him to talk to understand the man.

It was an apology, an offering and a declaration all in one.

She raised an eyebrow.

“Dangerous offer to make to a psychopath.” She mused but his expression didn’t falter, showed no hesitation, if anything the intensity only strengthened. She stood, the movement graceful and with an edge of confidence it had lacked the past eight months, and moved to pace across the giant, stone face. Her mind whirling as she thought over what she wanted to say, wanted to do. The entire world at right angles as she cycled chakra to comfortably stay sticking to the stone.

She paused directly below him. Turned to watch him looking down to watch her. Let the anger and frustration and *hurt* of the last eight months seep into her face. She lifted a coated kunai and slowly, pointedly threw it directly between his eyes.

He didn’t move. Didn’t flinch. Simply watched the weapon with a weary sort of acceptance. When it was inches away from killing him, she let her chakra catch.

She appeared above him, a foot on either side of his legs against the edge of the stone and doing nothing to stop gravity assert itself. A hand snapped out to twist in the front of her shirt and held her in place as she teetered dangerously over the drop. Sakura tipped her head backwards to continue watching the blinking lights and hummed.

A warm arm snaked around her waist and pulled gently.

She followed the suggestion without protest. Allowed Hatake to guide her into his lap, pressed against his chest and firmly on the relative safety of the ledge. He curled over like an over sized teddy bear, pressing his nose into the top of her head and wrapping his arms around her back. Her forehead rested against his sternum, her fingers hooked in the edges of his flak jacket and she listened to his steady heartbeat. Wrapped up in a little pocket of warmth.

After a few minutes she pulled back, the arms around her waist tightening to prevent her leaning too far backwards as she pushed up onto her knees so that she was looking down on him for once, even if it was only barely. Her eyes narrowed into her harshest glare, though it was hamstrung by the genuine smile pulling on the edges of her mouth.

“You’re such an asshole.”

"I am sorry." He said, sounding genuine.

"I wasn't talking about that, though you are such a fucking asshole for it." She sniffed haughtily. "I was actually referring to how you obsessively hide your face despite being extremely good looking."

"That is true." He agreed, voice solemn but with a happy crinkle at the corners of his eyes. Sakura watched the corresponding happy curve of his mouth with fascination. Green eyes greedily committed the sight to memory.

"Humble, too." She muttered and he snorted.

His fingers dragged up her neck, leaving goosebumps in their wake, and he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Sakura shivered and glanced back upwards. The grey of his eyes had darkened considerably.

She ignored the growing flush on her cheeks and crossed her arms over her chest. "I've decided."

He raised a smug looking eyebrow and his hands shifted to splay over her hips, making her flush deepen as they came perilously close to sliding over bare skin. Her eyes narrowed.

She refused to lose to the asshole again.

Sakura cycled her chakra faster, heating up her body until his skin felt almost cold to the touch. Her fingers gripped his chin and pulled it upwards, watching his pupils dilate as she leaned in until their lips were just barely brushing. Her hair fell around them in a curtain of pink. She shuffled closer and ran burning fingertips over and around the back of his neck.

"There are fifteen weeks until my next birthday." She murmured, tightening her grip on his chin warningly and leaning backwards when he tried to push into the kiss. He stilled obediently but his grip on her hips tightened to the edge of pain and his expression turned predatory in a way that sent a shot of adrenaline straight to her already pounding heart.

She shifted so her mouth was next to his ear, unnaturally warm breath ghosting over the sensitive flesh and a hand twisted to pull lightly on the silver mane of hair. Kakashi groaned, little more than a low rumbling through his chest, and his fingers moved to slide determinedly over the backs of her thighs and up the ends of her

shorts. When she spoke her voice was breathless.

“Impress me by then and I might even let you take me on a date.”

Sakura disappeared in a swirl of leaves.

Chapter End Notes

I really don't have a good excuse for how long its been since I last posted. I love you all and I am sorry.

I don't want to make excuses? But I also feel bad just saying nothing? So if you want to know then here?

My mental high of enjoying writing this fic crumbled to the point where just thinking about looking at it made me want to throw up from the anxiety, but of course it was cracking down and actually reading over my work that made me feel okay enough to post. I don't want to use poor mental health as an excuse for not doing something because I know (speaking for me personally at this point, not anyone else's experiences) it's a slippery slope to not doing anything and mentally excusing it because I have 'poor mental health'. I feel like I'm constantly living on a balance between giving myself needed breaks and not self flagellating over actual medical problems that I struggle with every day and using those medical problems as a crutch to just justify laziness and becoming a shitty person. At what point does forcing myself to push through my anxieties become just another form of self harm? At what point does catering to the whims of my mental state become self defeating?

I don't know and likely none of this is appropriate to be pushing on random strangers on the internet but what are fanfic sites if not to share porn and bitch about our mental health problems hahahahahahaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH AAAHAHAHAHA
AAAAAAAHHAHAHAHAHA AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHFHFBURFJENJDS

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